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## We Are the Asteroid

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*University of Central Florida*



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WE ARE THE ASTEROID

by

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B.A. Florida Atlantic University, 2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

*We Are the Asteroid* is a collection of personal essays concerned with the power of erasure and manipulation of chronology that comes with writing. It both acknowledges and participates in the fact that nonfiction writers become unstuck in time, whether they want to or not, traveling between ages, rearranging the order of events into the stories they tell. The collection centers on a few traumatic events in the narrator's life, and it explores the ways in which she deals with those events through her writing. The writer utilizes various structural techniques, such as the segmented form, to play with the idea that the placement of events in a story can affect the emotions attached to those memories. In this way, the writer looks at the power that writing has over illness, violent relationships, and even death. Exploring topics as wide-ranging as infertility, inauthentic grief, and sacrifice, the collection resolutely returns to the idea that the nonfiction writer is in control of, and therefore charged with, the responsibility of making beautiful even the saddest of memories. *We Are the Asteroid* serves both as a wish to go back and an acknowledgement that we must, despite our abilities and tools as a writer to dwell, continue moving forward.

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“Everybody turned into a baby, and all humanity, without exception, conspired  
biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve.”  
—Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

BANANA HEAD .....	1
PLANCHETTE.....	29
PLASTIC FLOWERS.....	36
SKIN .....	53
THE BREAK-UP BOOK .....	86
HOW TO PUT A COW BACK TOGETHER.....	109
CARPIDEIRAS .....	112
A LIFE YOU LOVE.....	143
LIKE MAKING A WISH AND TELLING SOMEONE.....	162
THE BUILDINGS REBUILT THEMSELVES .....	183
APPENDIX A: READING LIST .....	186

## **BANANA HEAD**

When I visited my mom in Moffitt Cancer Center, they made me wash my hands in water so hot it made them numb. We had to cover our faces in masks and our hair in caps. Like we were going to see a baby. Which in many ways, we were, because my mom's immune system was so new. After receiving stem cell transplants, patients have to redo all their vaccinations because they must receive enough chemo to wipe their immune systems clean to make way for new ones.

We visited on Easter and Jesse and I wore our hair back in tight buns because we didn't want to remind Mom that she had lost hers any more than we had to.

The hospital "hairstylist" had come and offered to shave the rest of it off when it started tangling and falling out in soft puffs and clogging the shower drain. We couldn't all fit in the hospital room. We took shifts standing in the doorway, in the hall that was darker than any medical hallway on TV. I didn't like it because there was a dying man in the room to the right and no one was visiting him to soothe his bedsores with cool gentle hands. He kept flipping in bed, face squeezed together instead, by invisible, sharp-nailed fingers of pain—facing the window was unbearable because he couldn't go outside; facing the usually empty hallway was almost worse, because no one was coming inside.

In the future, we would visit my mother and the room to the right would be empty. I'd never ask the nurses what had happened to the man, if anyone had been there to kiss his smooth, throbbing temples that probably held prayers for relief from pain. If anyone had been with him at the end. I didn't want to know because I didn't want to think about it happening to my mom.

When I got to go inside Mom's small room, I carefully set up my Easter present next to the window so that she would be encouraged to look out.

"Hey, babes," her voice was fever-small, like she hadn't heard herself use it all day. "Happy Easter."

"Happy Easter," my arms swayed away from my sides, but I couldn't hug her. Wasn't allowed to touch her, the nurses had instructed. I redirected my hug into a fierce point at the poster-size photo collage I had framed and put by the window. "I made you this."

"What's this?" she placed her feet on the bedside floor and held tightly onto the scarf she had put on in an embarrassed way as soon as we arrived.

"Just some pictures Dad told me not to use," I shrugged. "I wanted you to have them because they were just sitting in the drawer getting dusty."

"Oh Sloane," her voice thickened.

"I wanted," I repeated the verb and changed course mid-sentence, "you to have something nice for your walls," I touched the thin gown over her arm with a finger. Fuck the no-touching rule; I had washed my hands twice.

"It's really pretty," the tears sounded like they were coating her throat. Or maybe it was the mouth sores from the chemo. Even though she'd been on liquid nutrition for two weeks prior, she now had to swallow pills that sliced those almost-healed mouth sores right back open. "Hon, tell me a story."

"Okay... Pick a picture and I'll tell you the story that goes with that picture."

“That one,” her finger indicated a photo of me and Jess and Dad at the Lake Lizzie house.

In the French blue living room with the sunflowers she stenciled on the wall herself. Mom took the photo, probably with a one-year-old Jude on her hip. In the photo, I’m holding up a large blue comb and attempting a Charlie’s Angel pose, but I’m accidentally half blinking. Jesse is holding up a woeful 90s scrunchie and smiling with her lips folded back over her teeth. Dad looks tired and his cleanly cut grey hair is in various stages of styling. Held by several hairbands are ponytails and barely two-inch-long braids.

“Okay,” I told Mom. “That one,” I paused, collecting the story from its folded place in my brain, and she nodded, still looking at the frame.

“I wish my hair was even that long now,” she interrupted and touched Dad’s short hair in the picture. She plucked at the scarf with the tribal print—the one I picked out—and gave a shuddering sigh, the kind that usually happens to me after a long cry. A tired breath. “Let me tell you something. Bald is not beautiful. It’s some bullshit, you know, that a gorgeous model type with a perfectly shaped skull,” she runs her hands over her scarfed head, “can take photos and now everyone has to feel lucky and happy to be bald.”

“Mom,” I touched her arm with two fingers. Hands were still clean. I thought about something a friend had once told me, that men are naturally drawn to women with longer hair. That it’s in their DNA to want a healthy and fertile woman. And long hair is a sign of those two qualities. I thought then about this, and how I would never bring this fact up to my mom, even if she did grow her hair back. Because I didn’t want her to

think I was one of those people who believed that long, straight hair was the only kind of hair to have.

“I don’t want to be bald, Sloane. Everything else is much more painful, but I don’t want to be bald. I want my hair back.”

She hugged me and I tried not to breathe on her. I looked over her sterile lemon-scented shoulder out the window. I could see Busch Gardens from the room. They had built a new roller coaster recently. She watched it every day through the window, she later told me. But in that moment, I cried because each twist and turn looked like a curly lock of hair.

#

While I was growing up my mom never washed her hair in the shower. She set up a salon for herself in the kitchen. I would sit on the counter next to the sink and turn smooth, expensively named bottles of shampoo over in my hands while I watched her dip her honey-coloured curls in the stainless steel basin. I was always amazed at the thorough way that she could wash her hair under the rushing faucet without getting a drop of water on the surrounding countertops. She did it the way that they did at upscale hair salons, washing her hair without having to wash the rest of her body.

The most inconvenient part of my nightly bath time was knowing I couldn’t be fancy. That I had to sit like a loser in the tub, with nothing to do but be surrounded by duckies I had disregarded by the age of four, wispy blonde hair sprouting from my head in all directions. Sometimes I’d let the shampoo harden over my hair in spikes till I looked like a sandspur.

My favorite part of watching my mom do her hair was when she would turn the faucet off and squeeze the excess moisture from her water-darkened hair, head flipped upside down.

Banana head, I would call her, laughing.

Even in a comedic shape, my mother had the most beautiful hair in the whole world.

She would leave her hair this way for my benefit, till it started drying and fell back over her shoulders to grace the tops of her collarbones.

Then she was Mom again.

#

Kyle and I first met two years ago as counselors at summer camp. He was 20 and I was almost 23. We shared banana pepper sandwiches and a penchant for sex in weird places. Our relationship developed quickly. At the beginning, we would have contests to see who could balance on one leg atop tree stumps for the longest. The kids were into it for a while, trying to guess who would fall first. They'd usually bet on me. They knew how clumsy I was, even on both legs, after the time I had instructed them not to run on the wet floor of the gym after a rainstorm, only to trip and slide myself.

During contests, Kyle would sometimes enlist the chubbier five-year-old boys to tackle me from my perch.

From this vantage point, we could see all the kids on the playground. And in the rare quiet moments when no one was around hugging my legs or reaching into his

pockets for camp dollars, he would whisper sets of inappropriate questions that I waited to answer till our car rides home:

“What’s the best place on this playground to have sex?”

“What if I pulled you into that dugout over there and fucked you during snack?”

“Why are we doing this?”

During one such contest, halfway through summer, Kyle was quiet for a moment, looking over at a little girl named Bryn, who was digging furiously under the swings and stopping every few seconds to smell her hands. I wavered toward the edge of the stump, ready to rescue her before she decided to use any of her other senses to explore the playground sand.

“I love Bryn’s hair, don’t you?” he reached over and held my wrist for a small second to keep from falling.

“Kyle, her hair goes down to her butt,” I hopped from the tree stump and stood on my tiptoes to stretch my stiff calves. He pointed at my feet to indicate I had landed in hot lava, one way to lose the game. “She’s miserable every time I brush it out at the pool.”

“But it’s so pretty. If I have a daughter, she’ll have hair like that,” he looked very quickly at the top of my head to tell me he was thinking of me, of what our DNA would look like mixed together. “And she’ll wear lots of headbands. Sometimes braids. And she’ll be the prettiest girl in the world.”

I thought about the night a week ago when we had secretly met in every room of the half-finished house in the bankrupt neighborhood that was frozen in time. It was located directly between the charming, finished neighborhoods where each of our parents

lived. He had pulled my hair, pressed my face into the concrete, left welts in the shapes of his hands on my naked skin, and kissed me four times afterward.

I smiled, adjusted my pink headband, and walked over to get Bryn out of the sand.

#

I was about six, and I had been hiding in the closet between my sundresses and fisherman sandals. The blue carpet darkened with my tears and drips of water from my hair. I had peed in this closet once, when the floor was still concrete and the house was being built. I liked to squat everywhere, practicing for a world without toilets—by the fence posts, in our cow pasture, in my closet.

The closet was finished now, and I was embarrassed. That morning, because we'd found some photos of my mom at my age that I had mistaken for myself, my mom had blow dried my hair. So I could see how much I looked like her adult self too. I loved the resemblance and had held my neck stiffly all morning at the grocery store so that nothing would fall out of place. I wanted people to see how pretty and grown up I thought I was.

But just before lunch, my mom had filled up the Ninja Turtle pool so that my little sister Jesse could splash around and escape the heat. I put on my Little Mermaid one piece, faded and fuzzy at the butt, and followed them outside, with the intention of soaking my feet and talking to my mom about mature things. I slipped while dancing to "Rock Lobster" and accidentally dunked my head underwater. The softness was gone. The frizzy curls would come back and I'd be ugly again. I wouldn't look like my mom.

I ran through the grass that itched my wet feet and climbed into a space between the wall and my toy box.

“I didn’t want to mess up your doings,” I had sobbed when my mom found me in my crevice after she put Jesse down for a nap. My hair had dried into a mess, like a cotton ball someone had picked apart.

I was snuffing back snot that dripped yolky onto the blue carpet.

“My doings?” she laughed. “What are you talking about?”

I don’t know where I came up with that term, probably too much *Shakespeare for Children*, a generously illustrated book that told simpler versions of my mom’s favorite stories. Stories filled with sorrows and joys she was eager to share with someone else. She read to me from it each night.

My favorite heroine at the time was Ophelia. Not because I admired her, not because she did cool stuff. Other Shakespeare girls were much better, like Imogen, who dressed like a boy. But Ophelia was the most beautiful. And interesting because she was crazy. I loved her because she made me sad. She made me want to be better at swimming. She made me not want to fall in love with boys. And she had flowers in her hair. She died with flowers in her hair, which was better than dying with no hair, I later realized. My grandmas and aunt all died painfully with no hair.

“My hair,” I placed my hand on my mother’s smooth knee to push myself off the ground so I could scoot further away from her into my closet. “It doesn’t look like yours anymore.”

“Yes, it does. Look at this,” she pulled me onto her lap and pulled a strand of her buttery hair toward mine, matching them up. “See? Same color.”

#

Hair is one of the things that helps distinguish us as mammals. Protects our skin from the wind, rain, sun. We are warm-blooded, sometimes soft creatures who give live birth.

When humans get chemotherapy, a lot of what distinguishes them as mammals recedes for a certain amount of time. They are often made sterile. They lose weight, yet their cheeks remain puffy. They have no furry coverings.

Cancer in films reduces all of that. Most of the time, young actors are in movies about cancer (ex. Kate Hudson in *A Little Bit of Heaven*) and they find out too late that they have the incurable and mysterious “Stage IV” cancer. Cancer that comes with ambiguous yet visual symptoms that can be applied by a makeup artist. In the film I just mentioned, Kate Hudson’s character doesn’t have time to lose her hair. Until she dies prettily, she has the trademark beachy waves people have seen being flaunted since *Almost Famous*.

When cancer patients do lose their hair in movies, they do so in a gorgeous way. Even in *50/50*, which a lot of people praised for more accurately portraying the “cancer experience,” Joseph Gordon-Levitt retained his strong eyebrows and his charm; girls with long shiny hair of their own were reverently touching his round head like a Buddha belly and flirting with him at a bar, though his condition and medication probably wouldn’t allow him to even breathe in such a dingy venue.

Chemo doesn't happen that way. Patients lose hair on and under their arms. They lose those tiny, almost invisible blonde body hairs that shine in the beach sun like sparkles. My mom didn't have to shave her legs for months. People lose their eyelashes and brows.

Cancer patients look perpetually surprised by their pain, even if they are not. Loss of hair is one of the things women are most afraid of when they get cancer, one of my mother's doctors told her, yet it's one of the least *physically* painless parts of the illness.

I think about it now because I don't know the answer to why this is; I'm still trying to figure it out. Still trying to understand why, in our country, there is not only an aversion to hair loss, but a subtle disgust toward seeing how cancer truly looks. It's crazy; it isn't sexy. Women don't want to be patronized when they lose their hair.

#

My parents had been divorced for about two years when my mother went into the hospital for treatments. My mom was dating, but my dad was sitting at home ordering surfboards online, making uninspired dinners of corndogs or frozen pizzas when we visited, listening to "Treasure" by The Cure over and over and over.

But when my mom found out she might die, my dad came back alive. As cliché as that sounds, it's the only way to phrase it. He took action. Farmed us out to our friends' parents and went to stay in Tampa as much as he could while still keeping his job.

My mom's sort of boyfriend Ken visited her as well, only when Dad wasn't there.

A college-nostalgic party boy of 34 years old, Ken was a teacher and basketball coach at the middle school where my mom worked. And he was in no way prepared to neglect March Madness to be with her. I guess it was wrong of me to hold him to that degree of responsibility.

He always left the room when she got blood drawn, his face a taking on a mossy pallor under the paper hospital mask. One time, after accidentally seeing a needle being inserted into an arm, he gripped mine so tightly he left deep red marks. He was trying not to pass out. He would disappear for days at a time. He turned away when she adjusted her scarf or massaged her temples, sore from her wig.

When my mom had finally had enough, she called him during one of his disappearances to tell him not to come back.

“You *sound* like the same Barb,” he intended to pay her a compliment, but failed miserably. Mom hung up on him and they never spoke again.

#

In the fall of last year, Kyle went back to Gainesville for his third year of college. I stayed in Orlando to begin teaching middle school. But we decided to try to be together, even though he had a history of infidelity and I had spontaneously broken up with two boyfriends before him for reasons as vague as discomfort, insecurity, and entrapment. Throughout the fall semester, I would spontaneously drop everything and drive up to Gainesville for the weekend, just to sleep in Kyle’s bed. We’d fine tune our taste for whiskey, watch *Lost* reruns, and play Risk on the beer can littered patio.

One night, we got as drunk as any other night and watched a bunch of romantic comedies (his pastime, not mine).

The evening ended with us lying in bed, listening to his brothers' laughter and beer pong sounds and music that almost seemed to vibrate the walls of the house.

We were ruminating on the Meryl Streep/Tommy Lee Jones movie we had just watched. Kyle scooted his head onto my pillow and picked up a piece of my hair, looking at it in the weak street light that came in from the window.

"Promise me you'll never cut your hair shorter than this," he repeated a line from that movie and gave the strand a tug.

"Why?" I had been thinking of bobbing my hair again. Maybe even getting a pixie cut.

"Because you're so pretty," he yawned.

"What if I did have short hair?" I retreated to a different pillow so I wouldn't be close enough to feel his lips in front of me.

"Then you'd look like my mom," he shuddered for comedic purposes, but I didn't laugh.

"What if I lost my hair?"

*Then you'd look like your mom did.* But he didn't say that. Instead:

"Don't worry, you won't."

We didn't talk anymore. He wrapped his arms around me, one held my shoulders, the other my waist. I couldn't move. He kissed the back of my head and held me till his grip softened, till he fell asleep or pretended to.

#

My mom lived for a summer in Tampa, in an apartment building painted a dark green that competed with the groaning trees overhead. It was safe there, the doctors told us. As long as she was close enough for Mom to do her four-hour magnesium infusions each day.

And when I wasn't working at a pizza place as a waitress, when I wasn't fucking around with my stupid high school friends in Saint Cloud, I was over with Mom. We found different places to have lunch some days. We went to the mall even though it had none of our favorite stores, but not often because Mom didn't like seeing models in the shop windows. We found strange Johnny Depp B-movies to watch. We tried cooking lasagna in the oven that took an hour to heat up. The refrigerator door opened backwards. The apartment we stayed in had two bedrooms, but they were set up like hotel rooms, each with two twin beds and a faint and untraceable cigarette and citrus cleaner smell.

When it was just me and my mom at the place, she liked for me to sleep in the other bed in her room; she liked falling asleep knowing she wasn't alone. But she always was a little alone because she never let me see her take off her scarf. She switched off all the lights and waited a few minutes. Then I would hear the soft landing sound of her scarf finding a place on the dresser; she tossed it across the room. I could see it in the street light that came in from the window, and I could see her smooth white head, but I never let her know these things. I still haven't.

The thing I remember the most is that Mom and I would walk together, her new wig pinching the soft skin, especially behind her ears. If the path were secluded enough, she'd sometimes swap the wig beforehand for the comfortable scarf with the tribal pattern. We would look for cardinals in the dark, minty smelling woods. We'd interpret the cardinal sightings as good omens—I would write a book; she would run another half marathon.

“If we see one more before we get home, that means your hair will start growing back tomorrow.” A few minutes passed. It got darker. “There! Did you see it?”

Only the bright red ones counted.

It was skill, not luck or blessings, that helped us spot the birds.

And even with those birds, some nights, when it was time to go to sleep, Mom would turn out the light, take off her scarf, and fall asleep wishing at 11:11. But in the morning, her head would be as smooth as it had been the day before.

#

During my senior year of college, five years after the cardinal sightings helped my mom's hair grow back for good, I took a ballet class for fun. The night after the final recital, I drove across my favorite bridge in Boca to see my friend Ricky in Deerfield Beach. Usually, we'd walk down to the beach to make sand angels and measure the distance from the ocean to the moon in thumb-knuckle inches. We would talk about other girls and other boys and read our writing to each other.

This particular night, he poured me some wine and sat next to me with his guitar while I washed the ballet out of my hair in the kitchen sink. I made a banana with my hair and told him about the recital.

“The music stopped halfway through and they started it on the wrong song,” I swirled my hair up into a thick towel that smelled of chlorine and accepted a second glass of Riesling.

“Did you mess up?” He led me back to his bedroom.

“No, but me and Felicia did this weird solo thing we weren’t supposed to do. While the music was still off.”

“You’re ridiculous,” he kissed my forehead and relaxed down next to me in bed on a pile of my wet hair. No expectations, no discomfort. I stretched out so I was draped over him, stomach to stomach, our heartbeats knocking against one another, we were intersected the narrow mattress in the shape of a cross. “But your hair smells good.”

“What if I cut it all off?”

“You’d probably look like that hot French girl we met at Respectables,” he moved closer. “I’d kind of like that.”

A couple weeks later, I would graduate, move to Orlando where I would meet Kyle, and Ricky and I wouldn’t talk for almost a year. We didn’t plan it that way; it just happened. But that night, he made me feel comforted about the eventual possibility of losing my hair. He made me feel like I would still be a mammal without it if it ever went away. Like I wouldn’t need to compensate for my loss with glittery scarves and jeweled earrings. I wouldn’t need to compensate by sexualizing my pain.

#

In tenth grade, I didn't know that my mom would get sick the following year. And I had forgotten my love for Ophelia, my appreciation for her flowing, watery locks. So when I got sick of seeing all the girls in my high school with straight hair that ended at the smalls of their backs, I went and got mine cut to my chin. I had just read "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" in my American Lit class, and I was feeling a little bit nervous, but also empowered. And I'd been feeling nostalgic about the fact that three of my four dead grandparents had died smooth-headed. So I wanted to make a wig or something with hair I had no use for.

"We can't use this," Hillary said in a voice as soft as her pale pink lips, an interesting contrast to the intentionally frayed black fabric of her clothing. "It's too damaged."

"Really?"

"Mhmm," Hillary touched a strand so quietly I couldn't feel her hand there. "Look, see the last four inches? Really damaged."

"Is that from swimming?"

"Probably. You're supposed to rinse your hair and shampoo it right after!"

"But practice is every day."

"What do you want to do with it?"

"I still want it gone," I frame my face with my hands. "All the way up to my chin. Like a flapper." That comment made her smile, demurely. Because everything Hillary does is demure.

“Are you sure? You have such pretty, long hair,” she slid her fingers through it and I shivered. “We could do a conditioning treatment and cut off the damaged part and it would grow back pretty fast.”

“No, I want it gone.”

That was the first of many haircuts with reasoning that stemmed from boredom. Even after my mom got sick, even after she lost her hair, when she asked my sister and I to grow our hair out for her to braid, there were times I’d get too restless and chop it short again. She would fight with me about it. But I never thought of how it might have made her feel to see the gold that grew from my head discarded on the floor to be swept with a dirty broom.

I think about it now, very often. I am growing my hair out because it makes my mom happy. I feel that cutting my braids would be disrespectful to her now. She tells me to enjoy my hair now, while it’s long. And we both know that she’s subtly warning me about our family genealogy. With one grandmother and one aunt taken by breast cancer, one grandmother by bone cancer, and one aunt by lung cancer, one grandfather by pancreatic cancer I know almost for a fact that I will eventually get sick. If chemotherapy is still a treatment when I am older, I will lose my hair. This is something that scares me more than almost anything else. It gives me that trapped and panicked feeling of watching the sand run down the hourglass as I run out of things to say in a word game.

#

Cutting off someone else's hair is a deep form of betrayal. I understand this now, after several lengthy conversations with my Native American studies professor, Dr. Youngberg.

From the first day in Lit Studies, I knew Youngberg and I would someday be friends.

"You're gonna get an A," he pointed at me and tucked a long dark piece of his hair behind his ear. "Because you're sitting in the front row. The grades generally decrease the further back in the room you sit." I smiled because someone appreciated my nerdiness. I was the only one in the front row that day. I sat up a little straighter.

I happened to mention Gerald Vizenor and had worn moccasins that day (he later told me mine were made in a factory in Asia) so the next week he brought me a broken-spined Sherman Alexie book and told me to read it because he could tell that maybe I gave a shit.

"The only other thing I'd read by him is his kids' book," I handed back *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* a couple weeks later.

"Did you like this one?" We were leaving class on a Wednesday. It was one of those weird days that started raining and was sunny and virtually cloudless by the time class was over. A day that felt like two different days.

"Yeah," I looked at the cover and it made me smile again to see how loved and torn that book was.

"What do you like about it?"

“The chapter titles, the lists, the equations, Thomas,” my mention of Youngberg’s favorite character made him smile. “But my favorite chapter is the one where they go to Arizona after Victor’s dad dies. It makes me sad.”

“Okay, then you should watch *Smoke Signals*. It’s made from that chapter. I’ll bring it next time,” he slowed down in front of the building that housed his office. “In that scene—they expand that scene—Victor cuts off his hair. It’s really emotional. Like really symbolic, you know?”

I remember thinking about Bernice from the F. Scott Fitzgerald story. One of the characters talked about how Bernice was an Indian. The other kids talk her into bobbing her beautiful hair and in retaliation, she cuts off the blonde, “Saxon princess” braids of her cousin.

People tend to associate “scalping,” removing of the hair and head skin, with Indians. But scalping was actually a technique used more by colonists than natives during frontier warfare. Scalping was far from universal among tribes. Then, when natives were sent in carelessly constructed masses to schools to be “civilized,” they were forced to cut their hair. Their eyes are dark and their mouths are set in the photographs they were forced to pose for.

Scalping, not mandatory haircuts, is something we’ve come to associate with Indians. In a similar way, I think, we’ve come to expect baldness from cancer patients. It’s an iconic symbol. But it didn’t make it any easier to see my mom hide her head in shame.

#

The IMAX theatre at MOSI was my favorite place to see movies in Tampa. My mom, Jesse, and I spent a lot of time there; films were one of our most frequent shared activities.

We saw *300* at MOSI. That night we had tried to bake cookies in what we had come to call the “unconventional oven,” but it hadn’t heated up in time, so Jesse convinced me to split the raw dough with her and Mom had a fruit popsicle. We were pulling into the parking lot ten minutes before the movie started, and yet we still had time to play the guess-that-car game.

“Jaguar,” I closed my eyes, not needing a second look to confirm my answer.  
“Definitely a Jaguar.”

“Hyundai!” Jesse pushed me towards Mom and Mom pushed me back, laughing.

I didn’t have my glasses and I was losing. Inside, I began to feel anxious because I hate going to movies if I’ve forgotten my glasses.

My worry sobered into concern as we stood in line. This was the first really crowded place we’d been in this summer. Usually we went to the matinees where the old people were already slumbering by the time we took our seats.

Mom looked around and smoothed her wig over her ears. Once, twice, three times. Quick staccato movements with her fingers. I grabbed her wrist when she tried to do it again. She nodded, understanding. She moved her hands from her head, but continued twisting her fingers together.

“Do you hear those people behind us?” she whispered in our ears a few minutes later, gripping my arm till it tingled. “Do you, guys? I think they said ‘she’s wearing a wig.’ Then they laughed. Did you hear them?”

Two teenagers behind us were making out and not giving a shit about my mother’s wig. They were whispering between kisses, probably about what row of the theatre would be the most advantageous location for a blowjob. But I can’t even begin to imagine how hard it was for my mother to put herself in a public situation feeling the way she did. It was, to me, the most beautiful thing in the world. To her, the scariest.

“Mom,” Jesse anchored herself behind Mom in line so she couldn’t look back at the supposed offenders. “Don’t listen, it’s fine.”

Jesse then hugged Mom and started talking about *CSI* episodes she’d seen that day. Jesse is good at hugs. She walked like a little Ewok as a toddler and reached out her arms to embrace people, chairs, Christmas trees, all before she could talk.

We watched the movie in what I’d call a somber mood. A word that, to my mouth, tastes as sour as its meaning. Mom brushed her wig with a special wig brush all through the previews, as if trying to prove to those kids that it was real hair. She only stopped when I touched her wrist again. We rushed out of the theatre so quickly afterwards that I barely remember the end of the movie.

#

Kyle and I were lying not touching on the banks of the dried up retention pond by my apartment. The February air hadn’t turned cold yet and I looked at my legs, skinnier

than they'd been in years, in cutoffs. Skinnier because of stress, of fear, of love so strong it hurt my stomach.

He drove down when I told him what my gynecologist had said: Blood work and tests, repeated at the same time every year, revealed for the first time that I had HPV. Kyle was the one who had given it to me, halfway through our relationship after he unknowingly got it from someone else (I would find that part out later; information would trickle to me from various sources). There was also a tiny growth on my cervix. I told him because, at the time, I thought it was the right thing to do. Even if everything was over.

What I didn't tell him was that the gynecologist said that I was still very healthy in most respects; a majority of sexually active women get some strand of HPV in their teens or twenties. Most strands go away on their own. But she was concerned about the growth. I don't think that Kyle deserved that tiny bit of reassurance that the doctor had gifted me. He deserved to feel pain and worry, the way I'd had to when I found all this out and had to drive home alone.

He tried to unbutton my shorts. Kiss my neck. Pull me closer.

"Don't you see why that's wrong right now?" I pushed his hand away.

"I'm trying to say goodbye to you," his laced his fingers through my hair and pulled me closer to kiss me. My neck stiffened. "And sorry."

"But that's not even the reason I'm leaving you," I sat up and picked the petals from a weed that looked like a daisy in a *he loves me, he loves me not* pattern. "I'm

leaving because I thought about it and I know that you would leave me if something was wrong.”

My throat felt like it was swollen shut. I forced it open because I had to continue.

“If the way that I looked changed, like if I got sick,” finished with the flower, my hands shredded the grass around my feet. “You would leave me.”

“Sloane,” he tightened his grip on my shoulders, reddening the skin. His voice edged with hysteria.

“There’s nothing that you can say that I haven’t already thought about. So don’t try.”

“Sloane.” It was the only syllable his mouth could form, apparently.

“I thought you should, you know, know,” I extracted myself, brushed off my butt and walked back towards the building. “You should take better care of yourself.” I said goodbye.

He didn’t echo me. He climbed into his brother’s red truck and drove back to Gainesville. I haven’t heard from him since.

My face was wet. I didn’t look to see if his was too.

I braided my hair to get it out of my swollen eyes and sat on the floor of my room that night, not bothering to get up and turn on the light, holding a dinosaur figurine that had fallen off my dresser. Jesse made me spaghetti-o’s but I wouldn’t/couldn’t eat them.

#

Later that month, I had my gynecologist check on the growth. I sat in a room that smelled of vinegar with my feet in the stirrups. My doctor had to pry my knees apart; I didn't even realize I was holding my legs shut.

"Just calm down," she told me. Then she put on glasses that, to my nervous and unsettled eyes, looked like the ones Lavar Burton wore in Star Trek.

The doctor coated my cervix with a vinegar solution, which explained the smell, and used a really bright light to illuminate what she was doing.

As of now, my doctor isn't sure what it is. They couldn't tell if my HPV is the kind that causes cervical cancer, if the growth is something I need fully removed. The only thing to do is wait a little longer, add more vinegar, and take a slice of my cervix. She said I'm probably okay.

I try not to think about my head without hair, my insides ravaged like land without crops, and my chest with a port, but sometimes these images visit me uninvited when I'm trying to sleep.

I'm mad at Kyle for giving me something that could make me sick and then running away as soon as he was given the chance. I am not far enough away from this experience to reflect extensively, but I do know that I'm angry. And I do know that I'm scared. I do know that I am looking for someone who will stick around.

#

Halfway through the Tampa summer, my mom started doing her magnesium infusions at the apartment. They gave her a Uhaul-size box of alcohol swabs, needles and tubes, a tiny backpack, and, of course, magnesium. My favorite part was the

backpack. There was a machine that had alarms when the infusion was almost done, and they put it in a tiny backpack for her so she could do stuff around the house while it was infusing. The machine would make a sound that we thought sounded like a little mouse sleeping. At that point in my life, there was nothing better than eating a big meal and snuggling up under a blanket with my mom to watch *Project Runway* while the little mouse machine squeaked and sighed. It was the most comforting thing in the world.

One day, after a walk, my mom tried to hook up her infusion as usual, a couple hours before we all went to lunch. Everyone was visiting that day, even my dad, who was slowly trying to court my mom again. The *peripherally inserted central catheter* (PICC line) in her upper arm, the port of entry for all medications and infusions, was clogged. A clot. She had this PICC line in her arm since the beginning of her time in the hospital. It was time to switch to a port.

My dad got on the phone while Mom stood at the counter, trying to flush out the line with saline solution. I was sitting on the couch, picking at a strap on my gladiator sandals and trying not to be nervous when the PICC line started leaking and little splatters of blood started hitting the wall. I jumped forward but I couldn't do anything to help because my hands weren't washed. I screamed and Jesse jumped up and Jude's voice cracked and my dad lightly pushed me out of the way and I ran to the sink. The phone dangled, forgotten. Dad grabbed an alcohol swab and held it out to my mom, who quickly closed the PICC line and cleaned up the tube. My dad wiped the blood calmly off the wall with a wet paper towel.

Watching this interaction between my parents was more intimate than any back-bending, swooning kissing scene or crackly black and white dance scene I had ever seen.

My mom looked at my dad and paused a moment before her fingers flitted to the wig to make sure it was in place.

I remember the hesitation from that moment and now recognize it as an affirmation that my parents were still best friends who loved each other.

My dad was there in Tampa when Mom's hair started coming out. He was also there when it started coming back. He told me that my mom would wait by the bathroom door when she heard the shower stop in the mornings. And I imagined that she'd ask him every day to feel her head to see if the hair was coming back.

#

I eventually grew to appreciate the scheduled hair washing nights brought by bath time during my childhood. Even though I had once hated them. It was usually at least Monday and Thursday nights, plus Saturday nights for church the next day. Monday and Thursday were smart choices because those were the days the trash was collected. It must have been relaxing for my mother to have two nights each week when she knew that everything dirty was gone from her house. Then the next day Jude would head butt one of our muddy calves in the pasture, or we'd cover him in sandbox sand and the cycle would begin again.

What I think I understand now is that our communal hair washings made us a family. Despite our age gaps, my brother, sister, and I had hair that smelled like Kids'

Pert shampoo on all the same days. It made us a family. As did our matching hooded towels my mom used to dry our hair with a biblical patience and a serene exterior.

Jesse and I would always ask for Mom to banana our hair and Jude just followed us around as we pretended to be ladies and he let us dress him up in our extra Barbie gowns.

#

This last Christmas, I was driving home with wet clean braided hair. When I dragged my duffel through the garage, I heard a soft and desperate scratching sound. Behind the old Soloflex there is a window. And in this window, there was a cardinal. My breath hurt my lungs.

A cardinal. Closer than I'd ever seen one. I wondered how many wishes it was worth. I softly set my bag down and tiptoed inside the house to get my mom, who was looking recipes for wheat-free stuffing and cursing at her so far unsuccessful attempts. Her hair was in a careless ponytail. I can't even begin to explain how happy I am when I see my mother put her hair up. Six years ago, putting her hair up was unfathomable.

"Hey babes," she snapped her laptop shut and gave me a hug. "I hate this fucking internet."

"Come here," I pulled her out of the dining room chair and opened the door to the garage quietly.

"What is it?" She followed me, covering her eyes but not her joking smile. "Did you get me the Camaro I asked for? It's the best Christmas ever."

"Look." I grabbed her shoulders and pointed her in the direction of the window.

“Oh.” Her smile disappeared. But not in a bad way. “Sloane.”

She walked slowly to the window. The bird, in the light filtered through the glass, looked like it was part of the glass. Stained glass in a church full of bowed, healthy-haired heads.

The bird, like a dragonfly I once rescued with my mom, was beating itself to death against the invisible panes of glass.

My mom reached out. I grabbed a broom, thinking to shoo the bird from the garage with the stiff bristles. But Mom reached out her loving hands. She enveloped the bird in warm, long-fingers that had pushed sweaty bangs off my forehead to check for fever many times, that had felt the smooth absence of her own curls. She held the bird close to her chest for a minute and released it next to the Indian Hawthorne bushes in our front yard.

She was crying. In a few minutes, my dad would tell her to wash her hands and scold her about how filthy birds are. But in that moment before we went inside, she cried because she had no wish for longer hair. She had to push her hair out of her eyes so she wouldn't get tears on it.

I put the broom down so she'd never see I'd even considered picking it up. I never wanted to mess up her doings again.

## PLANCHETTE

My parents found out I was not a virgin anymore when I was seventeen; my mom started crying, and my dad told me he was worried for the state of my soul.

“Look, honey.” We were seated in his office room. I was in the desk chair, and my parents sat, not touching, on the small loveseat. My father got a yellow paper out of the steel grey filing cabinet where he locked important papers like our birth certificates and our tax returns. “Remember this?”

I looked at the paper he handed me and I remembered it. It was a promise I had signed in my sixth grade sex-ed. class to stay abstinent until marriage. It was the only way for us to have happy marriages, our teacher explained. Because of our abstinence-driven sexual education, I didn't know what a condom was until I was sixteen, so when my first boyfriend objected to wearing one, I didn't think it was such a big deal.

I didn't feel much of anything when my dad reminded me of that promise I'd made to myself (and God, it said in fine print on the paper) to stay pure. But later, after being forbidden to see the boy who had destroyed my honor, I snuck away from the house, pretended I was going to my best friend's, and saw the boy instead. He and I were lying naked on his bed, staring at the ceiling fan in a post-coital stupor, when I told him that my parents knew about us.

“Do you think that what we are doing is wrong?” I pressed my nose against his chest and smelled the cologne mixed with the cigarettes I begged him not to smoke. His fingers touched a fresh bruise he had kissed onto my neck, moments before.

“Of course not. Don't let your parents make you feel guilty.”

Still, I couldn't help but be afraid in that moment. I touched the mark on my neck and thought about what we learned in our history class: archeologists dig and dust carefully under the surface of the earth. But what happens to the pockmarked earth once they have collected their broken pieces of treasures? What would happen to my soul when this boy was done with my body?

#

I'm in fourth grade, and my friend Colleen is mad at me because I am the only one of her friends who shows up for her birthday sleepover. She doesn't want me to participate in the arts and crafts her mother has set up for us on the patio table. But I sneak out there after I accidentally walk in on her while she reads a teen magazine and touches her body.

"Get out!" She tells me. "I'm having sex with Casey Glass." Casey Glass is the boy we all have crushes on. We write "I love \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\*" on our notebook covers, and everyone knows that those nine little stars are a constellation for his name. He has a dirty blonde bowl cut that looks smooth even when his tan face is sweaty. There is a heat that comes from his body, and especially his hands, that we don't understand at the age of nine. But we all love Casey Glass. So I can understand Colleen's sexual discovery happens akin to the week she sat next to Casey Glass in art class. I just don't know why it has to happen while I am at her house. We are supposed to be watching *The Titanic*, one of the movies on my parents' forbidden list, and Colleen is in there lying on top of her sleeping bag, her beaded capri pants around her ankles.

I wander out to the pool deck, where her dad is grilling vegetables we'll have with the bland oysters that I'll try to feed to her dogs later. What I like about Colleen's dad is that he doesn't try to force conversations like other friends' parents do. He is a firefighter, and he once told me the safe way for kids to buckle their seatbelts was under their arms. And that was the only time he talked to me. All the other times I see him, he just nods his head or waves slightly. I like him because he reminds me of my own dad. I sit down at the patio table where Colleen's beautiful blonde mother has placed six tiny wooden jewelry boxes (one for each of the intended party guests) next to paint and rhinestones. If Colleen won't play with me, I'm going to paint a box myself. The outside of the box is periwinkle blue, and the inside is dark green. I find purple fake jewels in the shapes of moons and stars to glue on the top of the box. I hide the box, still wet with paint, behind a potted plant and knock on Colleen's door again. She doesn't say anything about Casey Glass. Her lamps are on, and her window is open. She is one of the few people I know whose house has curtains. My Barbie sleeping bag and her grown-up solid pink sleeping bag are piled up in the corner, and in the center of her room is a light brown game board with darker brown letters on it. There are words too: yes and no, hello and goodbye. And a heart-shaped piece with what looks like a magnifying glass placed on top of the board.

"It's a Ouija board," Colleen sees me looking at it. "It helps us find ghosts in my room."

#

When I was seventeen, I broke a mirror one morning getting ready for school. A delicate rectangular mirror with gold paint around the edges. There was a bright sunset painted in the bottom corner of the mirror. I had always heard that breaking a mirror was bad luck. A lunchtime glance through a library book on superstitions confirmed it. Some cultures believe that because the mirror is a symbol for the soul, the shattering of a mirror represents the fragmentation of the inner world. Breaking a mirror leaves one susceptible to evil forces. There are many strange beliefs about the soul throughout time:

If you awaken suddenly, your soul might not return to your body from the world it goes to while you're asleep. Your breath contains your soul, so sneezing can expel parts of your soul you won't get back (that's part of the reason why people say "God Bless You"). Thunder after a funeral means that a soul has made it safely to Heaven. Some Indians believe that doves contain the souls of our lovers, so it's bad luck to kill doves.

Of course, I believed none of this. I cut my hands accidentally but calmly cleaning up the pieces of the mirror.

#

Colleen and I sit across from each other and we put our fingers on the heart-shaped plastic piece. She explains some vague rules that I think she might have made up.

"We ask questions. Just as long as we are nice, we can't get hurt."

We agree that it's most polite for us to introduce ourselves before we begin. We talk a little bit about our fourth grade class, about how I like to read in the butterfly garden after school and how Colleen likes to play basketball. We giggle and mention Casey Glass, then:

“Is there anyone here?” Colleen starts.

*Yes.*

“Can you tell us what your name is?” I look around, imagining I feel goosebumps because that seems the appropriate response to this situation.

*N-I-C-K.*

“Are you good or bad, Nick?” Colleen skips other pleasantries, which I find a little rude, and I hope Nick can tell the difference between us.

*I don't know*, the board spells out, and I laugh to hide the fear that's creeping into my silly mind. I want to stop, but Colleen keeps going.

“Are you going to stay with us?”

*Yes.*

“Prove that you're here. Give us a sign.”

“Colleen, stop!”

The curtains by the open window twitch and in that moment we forget the possibility of wind outside; the coincidence of the curtains' movement is too significant. We scoot the board across the room and we shriek so loud that Colleen's dad runs in the house with his greasy spatula. His slightly hairy belly hangs over the waistband of his shorts as he stands in our doorway.

“Girls! What's wrong?”

“Get it out!” Colleen screams, pointing a finger that pulses like her racing heartbeat. Her father picks up the old looking board and its pieces and he takes it and shoves it in the hall closet.

I don't sleep much that night at Colleen's. I have half dreams, half thoughts about Casey Glass chasing me on the playground, of the Titanic's lights flickering and extinguishing as it snaps in half, of the dancing curtains, of the letters on the board bursting into flames.

#

In college, long after I've broken up with the boyfriend from high school, I'll wonder for the first time about my soul again. I'll frequent dank bars where even the bright lights will be smudgy from smoke and my fuzzy drunk brain. Places where bodies will pressed together in humid ways. I'll dance to The Strokes with sweaty boys who are faceless in my memories, boys who run their hands along the sides of my breasts, the flutterings of my hips, the warm inner parts of my thighs, the soft and yielding flesh of my bottom, so easy to reach underneath my short flowy dresses. It won't matter that these boys I meet at bars have nothing interesting to share with me. It doesn't matter that they don't care a thing about me. We will have meaningless conversations about the taste of the whiskey and the quality of the local bands playing, and we will look at each other with drunk amazement at our similarities. These boys will start sentences with "I've never told anyone this before," because I suppose I look like a girl who desperately and naively wants to be told secrets that have never been spoken before.

These boys will take me home from wherever we meet, whether it's the dive bar with a painting of a goddess on the outside by the train tracks or a house party where we smoke cigarettes on the porch listening to wind chimes made of glass vials, dog tags, and

jagged arrowheads, sipping drinks so strong they stop us from feeling our summer bug bites.

These boys will take my hands in theirs in public (the only time that will happen) and they will take me home, where they will peel my clothes off like “he loves me, he loves me not” flower petals, and they will fuck me. And my heart will feel wooden and stuck in my chest, moving only under the manipulation of the unfamiliar fingers that touch my breasts. The boys will fuck me, and when I look into their eyes, I’ll see an empty image, like their eyes are mirrors that the bereaved forgot to cover up when someone died, and now they are catching ghosts in their smooth reflections.

## PLASTIC FLOWERS

I open my eyes and I am in a hallway of a building so pristine, I think it should be a church. There is a holy hush in the air, but when I breathe deeply, trying to absorb some of the spirit or whatever it is I feel, the scent of lemon cleaner and rubbing alcohol stings my nose. I can almost taste it, and I'm not sure, but I feel drunk. The potency of the alcohol is apparent. Moisture begins to gather at the corners of my eyes and I get the dry tongue and heavy pressure at the back of my throat that means I'm going to vomit.

I look for a garbage can, a toilet, a flowerpot, but there is nothing. So the feeling passes. I walk down the hallway. My path is lit by fluorescent rectangles of light. Hot lights, almost cinematic the way they illuminate me. My eyes burn. The floor is cold on my feet. My feet are bare. I look up and can't tell where the ceiling ends; it's pale as far as I can see.

I begin looking for someone so I can announce that I'm here, ask why I'm here. I don't find anyone. I see light grey doors, swinging, and with portholes, at the end of the hallway. Their shade is not too far from white, but it seems shocking in its subtle difference. I see the doors swing and I try to yell for them to stay open, but no sound comes from me. That's air I'm not getting back; I close my mouth. And begin running toward the grey doors, but I don't move any closer.

This dream is a not-quite-real place that I visit often.

#

When I was 17 years old, my mother was diagnosed with Myelodysplastic Syndrome, a rare form of blood cancer. I visited her at Moffitt Cancer Center. While she

was meeting with her team of doctors that would be simultaneous architects and chemists, building her treatment plan and balancing her intricate medication dosages, I would roam the hallways of the hospital. I would take the elevator to different floors, and each time the doors opened, a sexy robotic female voice announced the departments located behind the identical doors that I remember being the light pine color of IKEA furniture. *Fourth Floor: Bone Marrow Transplant Unit.* That's where we spent most of our time. I often saw a woman with the same illness as my mom with her husband in the elevator. Her name was Norah, and she wore blue sweaters. Her husband brushed the bangs of her wig out of her eyes, and he kissed her medically-puffy cheeks as often as he could, and she never winced the way my mother would when anyone tried to get close to her while she was on Prednisone. We only spoke a few times; they talked to me like a granddaughter, and I liked them. When I wandered the halls, I was struck by the feeling that I could recognize this place anywhere. The brightly-folded paper cranes strung in front of the five-story glass walls of the lobby. The pastel-lettered leaflets of paper advertising "Arts in Medicine" group therapy. The pond outside where no one talked, with giant rocks to sit on in silent solidarity. Still, the halls were easy to get lost in because there were no dreamlike swinging grey doors at the end of crisp white walls. There were dozens of closed doors with plaques labeling their distinctions, but the halls continued. Sometimes I'd circle the same nurses' station several times, and they would ask me what I was looking for, and I pictured myself a princess or a Harry Potter character in a hedge maze, expertly crafted to contain those who wandered its paths.

#

There was a girl sitting in the waiting room with pregnant women all filled up with love in the shapes of miniature watermelons, fruits in all stages of development and growth that served as reminders that they had been, at least at a certain point, wanted. The girl watched those women, not much older than her. She watched them, twisting the topaz and turquoise rings on her fingers and placing her palms on her own flat belly that held no love, no watermelons. A tall nurse with jawbones too large for her thin face came to the waiting room. Her tread was quiet on the mossy carpet and she collected the girl.

The walls of the corridor were warmed with hundreds of birth announcements. The tiny smiles of babies who didn't quite know why they smiled yet, smooth cheeks that loved to be kissed. A few cards even had pictures of the bare full bellies of expectant mothers, encircled and protected by two sets of hands connecting in the shapes of hearts.

"I'm sorry," the nurse pointed to the room at the end of the corridor with her clipboard. "Dr. Swoboda is late. She delivered a baby this morning." The nurse smiled, maybe because these emotions, the hurried joy and the good stress of surprise births, were her favorite parts of her job.

"That's okay," and they entered a room that smelled of vinegar. The girl suddenly felt like a crawfish, her useful parts used up and sucked out till she was an insubstantial shell. The vinegar smell made her uneasy, and she wanted to get out. "Can I just come back another day if she's busy?"

"No, it'll be fine. She'll be back soon. She's literally right around the corner. In the meantime, put on this gown." The nurse handed the girl a gown that smelled of stale

lemons, of cardboard and not-quite sweat, of vinegar, too. Or maybe that was just the room.

A bathroom with a painfully clean white toilet was where the girl took off her mother's topaz and turquoise rings in front of the mirror. The girl didn't know how naked she had to be for this kind of procedure. She didn't want to chance losing her mother's rings. Her mother, who waited for her in support solidarity sympathy, even though she had gone through way more than the girl ever had. She removed her clothes and folded them, being very careful. She tucked her purple underwear in the back pocket of her jeans and she hid her red bra in the creases of her shirt, trying to be respectable and ladylike. Not that it mattered; she knew she wasn't a lady. Ladies don't get HPV from secret encounters with boys who don't love them in orange groves and at the beach.

In the gown (she never was sure why they called it that because a gown was supposed to be pretty and full and optimal for twirling dance steps), she sat in the vinyl chair in the center of the room, put her feet inside the stirrups, and waited.

She surveyed the surroundings. The walls were painted a warm yellow color. There were lots of windows in the room. The ceiling had a little water damage creeping like fingers spreading apart, but that didn't bother her for some reason. What the girl became fixated on was the fishbowl filled with marbles on the side table. Buried in the marbles were the stiff stems of fake tulips. The girl hated fake flower arrangements, but in that moment, those fake tulips caused a swell of love in the girl's chest, a fierce and teeth-gritting affection for Dr. Swoboda. Those flowers meant that, in some small way, someone cared for the transient inhabitants of this room.

The walls were warm; there were large windows; there was the universal gesture for thoughtfulness, flowers, on the table.

It seemed to the girl that Dr. Swoboda had thought long and hard about the purpose that girls would be in this room, to have their cervixes dabbed with vinegar, so the miniscule growths would appear under the microscope, to have samples of those cervixes cut away to be studied for malignancies. Perhaps the doctors did other kinds of procedures here, happy ones, but the girl couldn't help but think that other girls in this room all had HPV, or something like it, that could lead to something far more dangerous, like cervical cancer, if left unchecked.

Girls in this room also might not be able to have babies, depending on the outcomes of their biopsies. Dr. Swoboda was smart and sensitive in keeping her birth announcements from fertile, healthy clients in the hallways and in the examination rooms where the women with the watermelon bellies went to gush and smile.

Here in this room, instead of sensual portraits of fertility goddesses holding their curving bellies, there was the plastic flower bouquet that would forever be a talisman of sorts. A symbol and a message to get well soon.

#

In hospitals, patients depend on a delicate balance of medications: clear liquids through thin syringes into IV tubes, pump-regulated pain relief, nurses who almost seem to appear at the press of a call button. Medicines must be balanced because they can ravage the bodies of patients just as much (and sometimes more) than the diseases they are fighting. This idea, this practice, must extend to the rooms patients rest in.

Calm, eye-soothing neutral colors are best suited for walls the patients can see from bed. Darker and richer colors of paint on the walls behind the patients' heads bring peace to visitors and (hopefully) a sense that their loved ones are being taken care of in pretty rooms, with clear glass jars of cotton balls, or something like that on the counter. Something that assures patients they are in a medical facility without overwhelming them with the fact.

Careful balances of cool and warm shades of paint help to make hospital visits more comfortable and tranquil for patients. I guess I shouldn't say visits as if they're voluntary—hospital stays, maybe, is the way I should word it.

The wrong shade of paint can interfere with the doctor's ability to assess a patient's pallor. Anything too bright can cast strange shadows on patients and make them look differently than they really appear. Bright shades may also provoke anger and anxiety in a patient.

Bright walls work well at promoting energy in the family activity rooms of children's wards, keeping the activity level in mind, of course. That's the major thing: activity levels and purpose determine the aesthetics of the room. When kids feel well enough to play, this should be encouraged, within reason. They are, after all, kids. Playing is what kids do. Sick children may become frustrated and confused when they cannot play with their more transient siblings (siblings who will get souvenirs for being brave and visiting). Sick children need places where they can retreat when they feel this frustration, this confusion. They need quiet-walled sanctuaries when they become dizzy or exhibit other symptoms that have placed them in the hospital in the first place. The

walls of their rooms must not be too boldly cheerful. Kids must be able to return to soft neutrals like their mothers' arms even when their mothers have to work and can't fall asleep at the hospital every night. The murals of tower-dwelling princesses and babbling mice and web-weaving superheroes are kept in the hallways and the activity rooms.

In long-term living situations, like retirement homes, wall colors should make the patients feel at-home. No one can account for a patient who might prefer ripe grape walls at home. But typically, when patients are going to be staying a while, designers must consider the effect of living in a place that is not home. Patients can become anxious if they cannot establish routines (walking around the nurses' station, showering, putting on a new outfit, looking out the window). The appearance of these extended care facilities should be comfortable. These places should encourage the establishment of routines.

At Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Florida, bone marrow transplant patients must come daily for certain treatments, even after they are released from the hospital. These particular patients are put up in apartments rented by the hospital and outfitted to fit their medical needs. Dark green buildings that look like regular apartments. They have warm yellow and wood-toned walls, kitchenettes tiled in linoleum, bedrooms with hibiscuses blooming across the comforters, leather couches the perfect distance from the front door for tired ends to long days. Hidden in the plastic wood cabinets are alcohol pads, gauze, syringes, special machines for magnesium infusions... More medical supplies than anyone ever needs. Unless you're a bone marrow transplant patient. But the hospital has the decency to hide these supplies in cabinets, making the apartment appear to be a temporary home rather than another hospital room in another ward.

#

I think about the dream of the hospital, the white walls, the absence of germs, the sterile and scary beauty. And I feel like this dream is something I've seen in the movies. There is no discernable explanation about the hospital features most movies have in common, like the vast expanse of clean, white hallway. Almost the same hallway in each movie, with detached extras masquerading as nurses, gazing at clipboards and tapping computer keys at the easily visible nurses' station. There are no medical supplies readily placed on any sleek countertops, no boxes of gloves or red hazardous waste disposal baskets in any of the shelves in the alcoves off the hallways that serve as rooms. Everything is streamlined and swept clean of evidence. There is no proof that anyone is here behind the doors that open and close, much less ill with an ailment that requires serious supplies.

In movies, there is nothing at all that suggests the function and purpose of a hospital: to care for patients. To heal them. Hospital shares the same root words as "hotel." Hospitals were originally places that took in poor travelers, pilgrims, strangers and cared for them.

Hospital rooms in movies are filled with actors who have no stories behind their illnesses other than some glossy courses taught by scarved or turtlenecked acting teachers and perhaps some vague idea of method acting.

The tiled floors of these mythical hospitals look smooth enough to sock skate on, and I sometimes half expect the actors to begin doing so, underwear-clad in French blue

Oxford button downs, hair loose. The floors don't look like the kinds of floors made for IV poles or wheelchairs or shaky feet.

In addition to its several other inaccuracies (cancer patients taking chemo and also going skydiving), a scene from *The Bucket List* provides a perfect example of the Hollywood hospital. In one scene, the patients are dressed in street clothes and, despite their compromised immune systems, they roam the halls of the hospital without protective masks. I'd also like to point out the floor on which they stand. From a viewer's standpoint, it's impossible to discern the material. I just know how sleek and slippery it looks. It looks like the same floor in *House*, *Grey's Anatomy*, even *Scrubs*. These icy floors would bruise the birdlike elbows and knees of patients upon contact.

Aesthetically pleasurable, the floors of hospital hallways in movies offer important clicks of shoes that carry their inhabitants to glassed-in rooms where lovely young women are dying delicately of mysterious cancers. The hallways look like they are held between two parallel mirrors; they go on forever. I feel like if I ran down one of those hallways screaming, my voice would be swallowed by its own echo. My voice would be lost in the space.

When someone designs a hospital, they have to be thoughtful when selecting tile. There are entire websites dedicated to hospital tile. It should be: slip-resistant, non-porous, strong.

A husband dropped his coffee on the hospital lobby floor because he hadn't slept all week because his wife had surgery to put a port in her chest and his oldest daughter had

prom. The liquid should not seep into the lobby floor. The tile has to be light in color so cleaning crews can detect visible germs and messes more easily.

The tile needs to support beeping and clicking and chirping machines that follow patients everywhere, rolling behind them to remind them they are alive. In corridors, low-density carpet is often used because it traps airborne germs in its threads and holds them there until they can be vacuumed up. It helps patients rolling their IV poles and their wheelchairs. It makes it less difficult for their slow and sometimes unsure paces.

#

When Dr. Swoboda came into the room, the girl thought about how doctors really should pay attention to the clicks of a door opening and closing. Those openings and closings have the potential to cause great anticipation or anxiety on the part of the patient.

Dr. Swoboda's door made a healthy sound when it closed. She greeted the girl with a pat on her knee and told her to scoot forward in the chair.

"Relax your heels into the stirrups," she explained. "I can't reach you from way up there."

A few moments later, as the procedure began, the girl decided that she wanted to tell the doctor she liked the flowers. She wasn't sure why, but it felt essential. She opened up her mouth to speak and winced a bit instead because the doctor had inserted the speculum and was opening her up. Or maybe it just felt that way. Maybe instead her face was showing pain because she couldn't articulate quite why the flowers were so important for her to bring up. They were a small detail, but they symbolized a lot.

Maybe the girl feels the whole flowers thing was important because she wanted her doctor to know that patients appreciated stupid things like that. Maybe if Dr. Swoboda knew, more doctors would follow suit and the word “care” would mean what it should have meant all along in medicine.

#

It’s peculiar, but furniture seems to be one of the few areas that movies and life overlap when it comes to hospitals. Specifically the leather chairs. I’ve come to think of them as chemo chairs because, quite often, that is their use: to seat patients who are being given chemotherapy. These chairs come in a few different shades: stone, beige, mint. There is usually a plastic, mock-wood desk attached to one of the arms of the chair that swings around in front of the patient. To call that part a desk is kind of a joke because it barely has room for a tiny Styrofoam cup of water. Certainly no one could use the desk for desk activities, like writing. There is a cupholder in one of the arms of the chair. Depending on the chair, there might be a recliner. There also might not be. In *Breaking Bad*, Walt White’s puffy, chocolaty colored chemo chair reclines; he is able to lean back as poison fills his veins and his pregnant wife sits nearby. But in *50/50*, the chemo chairs are more rickety-looking. They don’t have recliners, but they do have wheels, which I haven’t seen before. But all in all, they are mostly accurate. Authentic.

#

We were told to think of my mother’s bone marrow as factories that needed to be shut down for producing faulty products. The only solution to all those factory closings was to build more factories. Meaning, her entire immune system had to be wiped out by

chemotherapy and she needed a bone marrow transplant. I remember when she began her low-dose chemo in December of 2006, before she went to Moffitt. This was while she waited for the bone marrow donor registry to find her a match.

Every day after school, my mom would go to a specialist in Orlando and sit in a pale green chair. Her blonde curls hadn't fallen out yet (low-dose chemo wasn't strong enough for that). I remember the office being dark inside, despite all the bare windows. It gave me a perplexed and betrayed feeling, and I would always check out the window for storm clouds that were not there. My mother was hooked up to the IV pole for a couple hours. She ignored the expired magazines others skimmed for bits that were still good: travel tips, celebrity weddings, anything but hairstyle tutorials. My mom watched me and my siblings do our homework or she napped, dark roses blooming in bruises and shadows around her eyes because the skin was too thin and delicate. She was a modern Sleeping Beauty, poked with needles, filled with poison that made her sleepy. A Sleeping Beauty who had known all along she had to rescue herself.

#

The girl sat in a variation of the chemo chair in the room where her cervix would be partially sliced and thought about how the functions of these medical chairs kept them ever so slightly differentiated from each other. Chemotherapy chairs may be tucked into smaller places if necessary because they work in conjunction with tall and relatively thin IV poles. But dialysis chairs, while very similar in appearance, need more space because dialysis machines are quite large.

This chair had stirrups. But it was that same vinyl leatherlike material that covers the chemo chairs. How long would it be before the girl was in one of those chairs herself? Or would she ever get the chance to visit a hospital for a different reason? The girl thinks about what it would be like to be taken to a hospital, to be taken through hallways leading to important rooms, rooms with calmly painted walls and non-slip tile. A room where she would hold her watermelon-shaped belly and moan for Charlotte or Emma or Lucca to be born already. Where she'd say *I know I said I wanted a natural birth, but maybe an epidural?* This room would be the place where on those citrus-scented sheets, she would push forth from her body another body, a tiny version of her own.

A few weeks after the intimate procedure with Dr. Swoboda, the girl was told that everything looked okay for now, but needed to monitor her growth. That it was impossible at that point to tell what the cluster of cells meant.

“Was it even relevant?” the girl wondered, accidentally aloud.

“Of course,” Dr. Swoboda patted the girl's knee, her signature physical gesture. “It's important. I want to see you back here in six months and we'll take a look at it again.”

The girl hoped that the fake flowers would still be there in six months. That was the beauty of those flowers, she supposed. They couldn't die.

#

I used to think that maybe all of the medical films I've ever seen shared studio space. Somewhere nestled among the hills in California, there might be a big,

warehouse-style building that houses a hospital the likes of the one in *The Truman Show*, a fake hospital for actors. It would be designed with attractive lighting and camera angles in mind; a product placement deal with IKEA would ensure maximum Feng Shui. And beautiful people, starlets and extras alike, would be pumped in and out on gurneys, scene after scene. Each day, the elevator would rise and descend, but not for more tests or surgeries or patient discharges. No, once on the elevator, the actors and actresses would sigh, light up their cigarettes (because the film industry is enamored with cigarettes) and in one of the rooms, they'd grab some hummus from one of the long food tables. A few minutes later, synthetic tears in eyes, they'd go preform the movie version of CPR on patients: three slow compressions followed by a breath that looks like a kiss. Two patients would go into comas, one would come out of one. And three others might be pronounced dead before everyone left for the bar that night. The actors who played patients' relatives could come in for half days, just afternoons, because all they had to do was watch people die. And that would be a day.

One of the most glaring differences between movies and real life is the windows. Windows of hospitals are hardly ever looked out of in movies. The blinds are tightly shut, and sometimes the glow at the corners hint at daylight, but no one ever really looks outside.

Some hospitals have a long way to go, but many are becoming more sensitive to the fact that nature has a great effect in the healing of patients. Maybe ever-changing medical technology has caused us to depart from ancient healers and some herbal remedies, but as humans we need never lose our connection with nature.

My mom tells me now that looking out her window in the hospital saved her life. She had a tiny window, but she looked out every day and she could see the theme park Busch Gardens in the distance from her room at Moffitt Cancer Center. At that point, they were constructing a new roller coaster, Gwazi, I think. She saw progress every day. She saw the skeleton of the tracks, the bright new pieces of reinforcements, the test runs. And once it was opened, my mom saw people flying through the air and she imagined she could hear their laughing screams as they dropped through the air that rushed cool over their sweaty faces. It saved her life, Mom tells me, to imagine herself outside, breathing air that didn't come from an air conditioner, but rather from a tree. She listened to a song by a boy with a whispery voice. And the song had a lyric that went:

*If I could open up my window,*

*And see from Tampa Bay to Juno...*

And that song made her stronger because she really felt she could see that far, if she kept looking out the window every day, reminding herself that there was a world out there and that she was still a part of it, despite her time as a prisoner in the bone marrow transplant ward. She needed her window.

Maintaining a connection to nature and the outside world is important for patients. Many hospitals are making accommodations for this fact. Nemours Children's Hospital built what appears, from my drive on the 417, to be a garden on one of its roofs. At Moffitt, there is a quiet area with a fountain and rocks and a few bonsai trees. I can't remember whether or not it's called the Hope Garden, but that's what I call it. The nursing home at the VA hospital in Orlando has a glassed-in display filled with tiny birds.

The Winnie Palmer Hospital is for women and babies, and if you look at it just right from far away, the globe room at the front is made of windows and looks like a pregnant belly.

Inside the rooms, it is important to have paintings that use cool greens and scenes from the outdoors: lakes, woods, mountain ranges. Sometimes all it takes is some fake flowers in a fishbowl with marbles.

Small details matter, according to Jackie Jordan, director of color marketing for Sherwin-Williams. Jordan has worked with many healthcare facilities, and she has learned that making the patient feel individualized, rather than placed carelessly in a room is important.

So why do movies still portray hospitals as stark white institutions that are no longer completely reflective of reality? I think that it is to establish some sense of credibility, some variation of ethos that convinces the audience that these beautiful people, these actors, really are doctors and nurses. Filmmakers present exaggerated stereotypes of hospitals and caricatures of doctors and nurses. And yet, doctors and nurses only appear in 77% of movies made about cancer. So I guess the belief is that they should be credible, letting people know they really are who they say they are. Even though they're not.

But the truth is, movies in which hospitals all look the same are flat. They do not reflect our times as we try to shift the patient experiences at many hospitals. They do not show progress or real life. They don't show the care that goes on. They are simply beautiful, empty shells of places, easily broken down during set changes.

Hospitals are not sleek and white and immaculate. They are imperfect places. It is comforting to me to know there will always be repairs going on somewhere, that there will always be improvements being made. Hospitals are where people go to heal. It makes sense that hospitals should always be healing themselves as well.

I still dream about hallways. There are variations, of course. I never have the exact same dream twice. Sometimes in the dream, I'll be pregnant, looking in vain for an empty room in which to have my baby. Other times, blood drips from me, the way Dr. Swoboda said it would for a couple days after my biopsy. In that version of the dream, I leave a slick red trail on the slick white ground. At times, I feel the hallway collapsing in on me, getting smaller as I run toward the impossible grey doors at the end. This is the dream. It always includes this hallway. It has been collected and constructed in my mind after many movies, and some trips to hospitals. It is a collage, sampled from many still life memories and observations, a not-quite-real place.

#

The girl has to go back to Dr. Swoboda every six months to have her cervix dabbed with vinegar and examined for further flaws. She's still afraid and sad when she sees the birth announcements on the walls; she still is convinced she cannot have children herself. But Dr. Swoboda will firmly pat the girl's knee as she tries to solve the threats and mysteries inside her body.

And the girl's eyes, scanning the room for something to hope or wish or pray on, will rest on a fishbowl filled with marbles the color of water that almost breathe life into the stiff stems of dusty plastic get-well tulips.

## SKIN

It is January, probably the third week of January, so when Ricky and I walk along the beach, right between the dry and wet sand, we are like those little beach birds, the ones who wait right by where the wave will break their round fat bodies on stick legs, the birds who run away like they are surprised by the water each time the wave comes. The way they run towards and away from the waves, we are unable to decide whether or not the water is too cold for our bare feet beneath our cuffed jeans. Ricky's apartment is a walk away from the beach, and he shows me a shortcut and helps me so I won't step on any broken beer glass from the trucks whose drivers have sex with their girlfriends on the beaches at night. There are clusters of people here and there by the pier on Deerfield Beach wrapped in Mexican blankets or puffy bedspreads. The beach is mostly vacant, unusual for such a crowded beach surrounded by surf shops and bars and only a few miles from our college. But it is a very cold day.

#

I learned about sex from *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. I was in about fifth grade. Of course, my mom had "the talk" with me much earlier than that, around third grade, when I had seen one female cow mounting another in our pasture. My mom explained that this was just something animals did, but sex was when our bull made a cow have a baby. My mother's version of sex: a picture book to explain because in our family, books could explain anything we wanted to know. There were pictures of animals and the way they mate and lay eggs; there was one tiny drawing of humans standing up and facing each other with a color-coded penis nestled in a color-coded vagina. It was sterile, clinical,

necessary for babies when you're married, but only for babies when you're married. I didn't know sex could include kneeling, straddling, sucking, biting, slapping, writhing, pushing, pulling. Until then, I didn't know that there was movement; I thought that people just stood there silent, penis in vagina, waiting until someone said *yes, I think that'll do it. I think we are going to have a baby now.*

But one day, when I was dusting the bookshelves in my mother's bedroom, I found her college copy of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. Because of the feeling in my stomach, I knew I was doing something wrong when I took it off the shelf and slid my thumb through its pages that were greying with age. I was home alone that day, so I sat wedged between the bookshelf and the wall, reading about breasts swinging over an erect phallus. My eyes widened when I read the part about sex on the forest floor. I felt something drop inside me like the moment you lift out of your seat on a roller coaster and I felt just as excited. I heard the mechanical garage door opening, and I put the book back in its place and finished dusting the shelf. I was just leaving my mother's bedroom when she walked into the house.

"Whatcha doing, babes?" She lifted her curly hair, sweaty from running, off the back of her neck and fanned her flushed chest.

"Nothing, dusting," I answered too quickly, holding out the Pledge can and the old washcloth as evidence.

I don't remember the rest of our conversation that day. I only remember waiting for those bookshelves to get dusty again so I could sneak back into the intense pleasurable world of Constance and Oliver, read about his fingers on the soft warm secret

skin of her hips. After that day, my attitude on sex was different. I understood that it was not just a necessary action; it was something to be enjoyed. It didn't have to happen quietly in a bed because sometimes people would just have sex on a forest floor. In my own bed at night, I would pull my covers up to my chin, touching the secret skin of my own hips, running my fingertips up to my tiny, still-developing breasts. Pretending my fingers were not my own, but instead were the rough and callused workhands of a groundskeeper, I made little circles around my nipples until my breath was heavy, until I was afraid anyone in the living room still awake would hear me.

#

Before Ricky's and the January beach, I spend the morning with my boyfriend Vitek at a pet store, trying to pick out a hamster for him. Something for him to take care of, that's what he wants. We sleep at my apartment the night before, and I walk around getting ready naked all morning, hoping to catch his attention, but he asks me to move from in front of the mirror when he brushes his teeth. We've only been dating three months and he is already bored of me. In the beginning, Vitek and I had sex in a resort's sun chair after too many blueberry vodka and sprites at his band's show. But things have changed. He starts telling me that he is too tired to have sex with me after going to school and working long shifts at a restaurant. We can go for sushi or for beers at our favorite tavern, he can teach me how to speak Czech, he can proofread and critique my papers on Baudrillard, but sex is too tiring. I feel like I'm being unfair. We go to get beers with his friends some nights, but when I put my hand on his leg on the way home, he picks it up and holds it with his hand instead. He climbs into bed at his house or my

apartment, turns out the light and falls asleep. When I get close to him in my underwear, he turns over and says I should put a shirt on because it will be cold in my room when we wake up.

#

They say that we learn how to be in relationships from our parents. And when I say they, I guess I mean people. Some of my friends look to their parents' or grandparents' long, blissful, quiet marriages as paragons for what it means to love someone.

"They act like teenagers in love," these friends explain when I am baffled at the notion that their parents kiss on the lips and hold hands and go on dates. "They're crazy about each other. I want that someday."

*I want that someday.* Or: there are also the friends who blame their inability to have committed relationships on those who raised them.

"I can't be trusted," a boy once told me, apologizing in advance for his transgressions to come. "It's all because my dad cheated on my mom. I never learned how to be faithful."

Which I think is total bullshit, by the way. Because just as much as we can learn how to be in relationships from our parents, we can learn how *not* to be in relationships from our parents.

If you grow up in a house where your parents give each other side hugs, if your mom stiffens her neck to avoid even kisses on the cheek, if sleeping on the couch is a preference and not a punishment for your dad, then you don't learn much about sex as a

kid. My friends in elementary school would whisper stories at lunch about walking in on their naked parents, but I never had experiences like that. Until my parents started fighting when I was in middle school, they had a peaceful and platonic relationship. I'd wake up each morning to find them having coffee; my dad would be telling my mom what he was going to do that day and my mom would tell my dad about the dreams she'd had. They would talk on the phone during lunch. And each day would end with them reading in adjacent chairs and sipping mint tea. My parents loved to be near one another, but they hardly ever touched. They were excellent best friends, but they didn't treat each other like lovers.

They would fast-forward through the part where you see Rose's drawn breasts in *The Titanic* and the part where you see Romeo's ass in the 1960s version of *Romeo and Juliet*. On the rare occasion that I was home alone, in between reading snippets of D.H. Lawrence, I would watch those parts they skipped over. Very difficult to do because I'd have to rewind the tape so they wouldn't know. From a young age, I knew I was very physically passionate. I knew that I wanted those jaw-tightening kisses in the rain, those run up and jump in his arms at the airport, the sex on the forest floor. I had to learn about those things I wanted from my books. I would draw large-breasted fairy queens lounging under trees with donkey-headed chubby men (my interpretations of Shakespeare) and I would write stories I'd tear up afterwards of nubile princesses in low-cut dresses and the evil old men who they let touch them to save their kingdoms. I thought out carefully bizarre scenarios.

When I watched *Star Wars*, I thought of alternate versions of what happened with Jabba the Hut's disgusting tongue and Leia in that tiny slave bathing suit. She was all chained up. Where did his tongue go in the parts before Luke came to the rescue? Did his tongue feel good? I felt like a freak for wondering.

I recited stories that came from nowhere in my head. I had a crush on Jimmy Buffett's voice, so I would close my eyes before going to sleep and imagine him and me on a boat near an island with coconut soft white sand, Jimmy Buffett kissing my neck and telling me that he was going to write a song about me as a mermaid. A naked mermaid. I thought about this prospect with my hands under the hems of my Gap Kids tee shirts.

Other times, I pictured myself a teenager, washing cars at fundraisers, my hair long and bleached by the sun, my bikini white. I liked the idea of being watched by older biker men with dirty hands and long braided beards. Chubby, hairy, gross men, men who would have to wrap both arms around my waist and carry me away, like Hades and Persephone. The princess, daughter, muse of spring being taken by the king of darkness. I thought to myself about how I would have eaten the pomegranate seeds willingly if it meant someone would undress me and look at me naked. Run their fingers over my secret skin and tell me I was beautiful.

It wasn't until someone I loved did like Hades, took me without asking and fucked me in a graveyard till it felt like the earth would split open and swallow me that I regretted my naïve fantasies.

#

Ricky and I met a little over a year before the beach day in January when we went to an informational meeting for the newspaper. We were looking for ways to get involved in college and squeezed together with a bunch of other people on sticky vinyl couches with crumbs in the cracks in a room with strange paintings of drug-induced monsters all over the walls. Bits of paper with nerdy journalism jokes were tacked up on the walls. Like: “A reporter and an editor encountered a genie in a bottle. The reporter wished to retire to the seaside and relax in a cottage for the rest of his days. The editor wished for the reporter to be back at work after lunch that day, for he had a deadline to meet.” Stuff that elicited awkward throat clearings, but not laughs. And scraps of old articles on sexual safety with obvious titles like “Let’s Talk About Sex.” I liked that everything in the room was slightly shabby, but at the same time slightly charming.

I sat next to Ricky on the couch. We were pressed close, my leg was touching his, and his arm had nowhere to go except on the peeling couch back behind me. The soft part of his forearm barely touched the skin of my shoulder blades, but it was there. And its subtle presence was more overwhelming than if he was intentionally touching me. He was chubby and young-looking in the face, his hair poofy and curly, holding smells of spicy foods he’d eaten earlier. He also had an adorable sweaty boy smell masked with cologne. That day, I told him that I liked his shirt. It was beige and it had colorful little nesting dolls lined up in a row in descending order. His belly looked chubby beneath his shirt, and that made me smile. He asked me to take a walk after the meeting, and he held my umbrella for me because it was raining outside. We talked about music, and we both liked Modest Mouse and The Strokes. We talked about books,

and we both liked Jack Kerouac. We talked about movies, and we both liked *Adaptation*. A week later, he came over between classes and we laid on the floor of my bedroom, wrapped in Mexican blankets watching clouds outside the long vertical 1970s window.

We were friends with mutual crushes on one another, always close but barely ever closer than the paper-thin space of body heat between us. We were always on the brink of kissing. But then over the next several months, Ricky would let me think he'd disappeared until one day he would demand to come over and cook me dinner. We'd drink bottles of wine together and fall asleep on the beach. He would leave me alone for weeks, and then he would ask me over right before bed. And while I fell asleep right at the edge of his mattress in the spot I felt was appropriate for guests, he would play songs he suggested he'd written for me. One song was called "Ghost" and it was laced with embarrassment and guilt he felt for not liking me more than he did. There was a fascination for me in the song, mixed with guilt. It was centered on a day I helped him move into his new apartment. He had asked me in jest to help him move in, but I had taken him very seriously. And I showed up to his old apartment before he was awake. I cringe when I remember that I even brought the blueberry bagels he'd requested while laughing. He hadn't thought I'd actually show up. After moving all day, after painting his roommates' walls orange, after unpacking box after box of books, we went to the beach. I borrowed a ruffled yellow bathing suit from his roommate Amanda, and we all went in the water. I sat on the rocks and pretended to be a mermaid and Ricky touched my legs and pulled me back into the water where our bodies touched each other with the excuse that the rip current was so strong that his hands ended up on my lower back,

pulling my pelvis into his; the rip current made me put my mouth against his neck and breathe in then pretend I was looking for air.

In his song, I was a beautiful creature I didn't recognize: I was mysterious, unattainable, but also scary because of my forward passion, scary because I tried to be around Ricky even though we were "barely friends." I was full of secrets, lonely in every photograph taken of me, something Ricky was repulsed yet enchanted by. I was a ghost of myself, and I got my own song.

#

As we walk on the beach that day in January, I just begin talking to Ricky about the naked mornings being ignored, about the rejected blow jobs in the car, about being cold each night despite the fact that Vitek is sleeping next to me.

"He makes me feel ashamed of wanting to have sex," I tell him. I think I say sex too loudly because a long-haired boy who has taken a dip in his wetsuit with his surfboard gives us a hang-ten and a crooked smile as we walk past him. Ricky laughs and shakes his head. I tell him to stop laughing. Should I be feeling like this?

"Sex should never make you feel weird. It should feel good," he kicks sand onto my feet, which makes me feel tingly like he is touching me.

We walk in the opposite direction of the pier towards the other end of the beach, where there are less people, just an old man with a tan belly and faded jean cutoffs every fifty or so yards, empty beer cans at his feet, legs stretched out in a chair with an inactive fishing pole buried in the sand next to him. A few skinny women with wrinkled brown skin and outie belly buttons in bathing suits too skimpy for the cold weather.

#

The first time I tried to masturbate, I was about twelve. I thought about Bill Murray's somewhat repulsive character in *Osmosis Jones*. I thought about Lady Chatterly's lover with his callused hands. I even thought about the simple drawings of the man and woman in the sex-ed book my mom shared with me in third grade. I got bored and sweaty, and absolutely nothing happened. I put my fingers inside myself, and wiggled them a little, not knowing anything about the anatomy or the function of the clitoris. I got bored and switched back to lying on my stomach on top of my wadded up baby blanket and stroking my tiny breasts. I was obsessed with breasts. Like most of the boys my age, they fascinated me.

I wanted my breasts touched so badly that I began secretly buying push-up bras in high school when I got Christmas or birthday money. I would arch my back in class to draw attention to myself, an action that both thrilled and embarrassed me. It was like riding a bike without training wheels; it was wobbly and scary, but you could go so much faster. I monitored boys' faces to see where their eyes were looking.

A boy in my art class looked down my shirt while we were painting a bike with a banana seat yellow (we called the piece "Banana Bike," in an awkwardly obvious attempt to be funny). He whispered to me that he saw that I was flat. My push-up bra didn't fool him. He told me I looked like I'd been run over by a steamroller, and given the chance, he wouldn't look again. This was devastating news to my high school psyche.

The first boy to touch my breasts was the first boy who admitted that he liked what he saw when he looked down my shirt in TV productions class. Mack, my first

boyfriend. We spent blissful hours after school where he would run his hands over my naked body. I studied the Kama Sutra while he was away in China the summer before our senior year, and when he got back, I showed him everything I had learned. His mother would close her bedroom door and pretend she couldn't hear our sweaty teenage bodies slapping together, the awkward sucking noises our mouths made.

But sex, in my family, was a bad thing, something to be ashamed of. That is why I hid my whereabouts from my father while my mother was away in the hospital. It was so easy to do; I would tell him I was spending the night at my friend Lindsey's house, but that we had gone to Becca Blanchard's house. My dad didn't know where Becca Blanchard's house was until much later, when my sister became friends with her younger sister, Anna. But by then, I was in college, and I didn't need the alibi anymore. In our secret days of high school, I would spread my body across Mack's blue grey bedsheets, wrap my legs around his shoulders, bury him deep within me, squeezing my muscles because I didn't want him to leave me. His teeth and hands circled my neck with bruises, different shapes and shades like jagged natural stones on a necklace. My dad saw these once while I was making toast one morning. He told my mom and she called from the hospital and cried told me that it wasn't classy and it made me look like I was a whore. People would talk.

#

Ricky and I end up at a collection of rocks that jutted out into the ocean. It is the same place we jumped in the water again and again, scarcely allowing our sweaty sticky bodies time to dry. Last summer, when I helped him move.

“We’ve been here before,” I tell him in January. “Last summer.”

He doesn’t answer, just kisses me.

As soon as Ricky kisses me, and as soon as I kiss him back, I am suddenly aware that I have cheated on Vitek. Nothing else needs to happen; I have already committed the sin. I am a whore. We walk back up the beach, zigzagging because Ricky wants to look for crab’s holes and bits of broken shells for the bowl on his nightstand. No distinct path is manageable. We scratch our feet on bitter, dried up seaweed. We don’t talk on the way back. A decision has been made without either one of us speaking. It’s a decision about what will happen to us; he will never love me. He doesn’t have to tell me for me to know. I’m exactly the kind of girl who disgusts him, a girl who is not faithful. I think it may have something to do with his parents. Ricky keeps a picture of his mother taped to his bathroom mirror. It is the picture from her nurse’s badge. She has the same full face as Ricky. He’s taped the picture at the part of the mirror he looks into when he washes his face with pink grapefruit scrub his roommate insisted he use. When he looks at his reflection, he is cheek to cheek with his mother’s photograph. Beneath the candle on the counter and the clusters of empty blue-glassed beer bottles he drinks from in the shower. These objects give the picture a shrine-like feel, and each time I wash my hands, I feel I should leave some sort of offering. Ricky fiercely loves his mother, but is carefully indifferent in romantic relationships. He will never love or respect another woman so much as his mother. He tells me that his parents split up when he was younger, that someone cheated and left the other, but I don’t know anything beyond that. I can assume it was his father, based on his reverence for his mother. I just know he hates cheaters.

And now I am one, and that confirms his secret suspicion that things would never work with me. I have not only cheated on my boyfriend, I have also simultaneously lost the respect of the boy I am really attracted to. He would never want to actually be with me because he would never trust me. *Girls are fucking crazy*, he would later tell me. *Not to be trusted.*

#

When I was late one period my senior year of high school, Mack got really scared and his mom took me to a local clinic hidden on a street called Grape Street so that I could go on birth control. Like most guys I've known intimately, Mack was opposed to using condoms.

"Baby," he'd whine. "It doesn't feel the same. I just want to feel you." These days, that phrase would be met with a giant eye roll from me, but back then, I thought that he was being romantic. He wanted us to be one. So I disregarded my family's detailed and immense history of breast cancer, and I manipulated my hormones with those tiny circular pills grouped clockwise in a compact container. My sister found the pills once. She walked in while I was taking one. I threw that day's pill on the floor, crushed it under the heel of my Converse, closed the container, and told her it was makeup, but her eyes followed when I hid the case in a pocket of a pair of jeans. And as soon as I left the room, she took the pills to my mom. My parents got really mad at me, they told me that I was going about things all wrong. My dad reminded me of a little yellow piece of paper I signed in sixth grade during my RESPECT! sexual education class stating that I would wait until marriage to have sex. He had it stored in a filing

cabinet with all of our school projects and important papers. He brought it out to show me. It was creased like a love note folded too long in someone's pocket, a note that hadn't come with the courage needed to deliver it. My dad unfolded it and showed me my signature with several unnecessary flourishes. An abstinence contract. A paper chastity belt. It was something I had pledged but didn't believe in anymore.

#

In tenth grade, the year before I lost my virginity to Mack, I was in a documentary with my mother. It was produced by the RESPECT! company. We met about four times at the local center for the arts, ate free bagels and bananas, sipped warm free sodas, and answered questions on camera. The focus of the documentary was drugs and sex and how those things corrupt young kids these days. I was the only kid who went to a school where backpacks weren't searched for drugs or weapons. I remember feeling like I needed to make my life sound more exciting and dangerous. So I went in the dark room where they kept the camera for the "confessional" type scenes. I sat on the stool with the blue background behind me, and I talked about the one time I found a cigarette in the toilet at my high school. Except I made it sound like a daily occurrence.

"There are these real bad kids at my school," I explained. "They smoke, drink, do drugs. You can't even go to the bathroom without smelling the smoke. It's overpowering. They smoke in the handicapped stall and they throw the cigarettes in the toilet. No one's even trying to stop them." As I spoke in a dramatic voice, I pictured that discordant horrifying music you hear in documentaries about real-life serial killers. People would watch this film in years to come and they would pity me for my rough

beginnings. “She made it out of that school where kids smoked cigarettes,” they would say. “She sure is something.” Most of my monologue was cut from the film. Same thing happened to my teary-eyed (genuine) moment where I talked about my parents’ divorce. The only part they kept was the part where I said “I can manipulate my parents.” It was taken completely out of context, and it falsely gave me a “poor little rich girl” persona, a Serena van der Woodsen from *Gossip Girl*. That was not what I had been going for. I had wanted to be brave crusader, underdog, strong female, but not poor little rich girl.

The parts of the interviews where I kept silent were the parts where they asked us about relationships. I had never had a real boyfriend at that point, so I had nothing to contribute. RESPECT! was one of those abstinence-based sex ed. programs. So there was no way they were going to have an open discussion about actually having sex. The answer for everything was to wait. They didn’t teach us how to use contraception; I didn’t even know what a condom was until I was 16 years old, when a classmate filled one with vanilla yogurt and put it on our English teacher’s desk.

#

Ricky guides me around the side of his apartment building and he hoses off my feet. He takes each foot in his hand and I suspect him of doing this lovingly for a moment. It is attentive, almost biblical, the way that he touches my skin. But this feeling that he likes me vanishes when we climb the stairs to his hotel-like apartment that shares a balcony with the other five doors there. He climbs behind me and he hits my bottom with his palm. I can tell by the flat way he touches me that he has no respect for me. He

touches me the way someone would touch a horse pulling a cart, to startle it into movement and service. To scare it into doing something you want it to do. In his room, he changes his shirt, starts getting ready for work. I sit on the edge of his bed. He folds up the corners of his comforter, wrapping me up inside like my mom used to do when I was a kid. She'd call it a burrito and she would pretend to nibble at my toes.

"I want you to wait here until I get off work," he announces. "I want to come home and find a surprise, a pretty girl wrapped up here in the covers." While I'm wrapped in his blankets, he marks my lips with his, another sin I let us both commit. I start to get up. I have to go.

#

Vitek and I met in a literary theory class my sophomore year of college, sat across tables from each other during tense discussions about Cixous. He was one of the only boys in the class full of angry women. I was late each day, so I always ended up sitting near him. I liked his tall height. His body wasn't necessarily in-shape, but was solid and warm-looking. I liked the brown and green long sleeved shirts that he wore; he would push the sleeves up when he was making a point about a book he liked. Vitek talked to me after class one day in October, asked me what I got on an exam, or something like that. We walked down the Breezeway together, a long hallway like an important artery that led to the major buildings at school. He asked me what I liked to read, told me he liked my name, and I remember wishing that the hallway would be about three times longer so we'd have more time to talk. He said goodbye quickly, shyly, and walked away. After that, I emailed him, which was probably the lamest thing I could have done.

I wrote him a letter over email, explaining that I didn't feel comfortable around people before I had talked to them at least twice in person, so I suggested he talk to me once more in class. I also responded to his many comments from our conversation in a clever way I can only be in writing and never in person.

We started having late lunches together after class each Tuesday and Thursday. One day I told him that my apartment was near the school, that we could walk there if we wanted to.

"Let's go have lunch at your house today." Vitek steered me on the sidewalk toward the road that led off campus. So he came over to see my apartment. He had all of his movies on his flashdrive and I had a plan to seduce him and we only made it about halfway through *Catch Me if You Can* before my plan worked. From my perch atop him, his big hands holding my hands to steady me, I stopped. I squeezed him inside me and he caught his breath.

"Do you think that I'm one of those girls?" I asked him, letting go of his hands so I could put my hands on his shoulders. Smooth shoulders. Narrower without a shirt than I thought that they'd be. "You know, like a girl who just has sex with anyone."

"No," his breath was still heavy, because how could it not be at that moment?  
"No, you're not. I can tell. You're smarter than those girls."

The problem was, at that point in my life, I was slowly turning into one of those girls. I had, for so long, been taught that sex was something to be ashamed of. Despite the fact that I was incredibly curious and interested in sex, I was also really embarrassed by it. It was this weird dichotomy that shouldn't have existed but did. And it made

everything so much more confusing than it already was. I remember in high school a boy made a comment about my body and I was so angry and embarrassed. I went home and washed my mouth with soap. I hadn't said anything bad, but because a boy in my algebra class told me I had a nice ass, I was mortified enough to want to punish myself. When a boy in my chemistry class wrote me a note saying I was pretty and he wanted to kiss me and maybe more, I reread the note about twenty times before I decided to cut it into tiny, unreadable pieces with my scissors. When I was finished cutting up the paper, I scattered the pieces into every garbage can in the house. I even flushed a few pieces down the toilet for good measure. That is how my dad taught me to dispose of credit card information and social security numbers, and I felt that practice was also relevant in this situation. Back in high school, when Mack first started getting physical with me, I would laugh in his face because I was embarrassed. What we were doing felt so wrong and unnatural.

And suddenly, in college, I was finally free. But I still had that sensation of shame attached with sex. The first boy I had sex with after Mack and I broke up made me cry. He didn't do anything wrong, but I felt so wrong doing exactly what I wanted to do with my body. I was horrified by my carnal needs because I had been taught that ladies don't behave that way. It was never a sexist thing in my household; romantic physical affection was just looked down upon in my household growing up.

But in college, away from home, I was beginning to see the power of sexuality. And I really, really liked it. Vitek was the third person I had been with, and in a period of the next three years of college, I would be with twelve more. I consumed men in the way

I consumed books. I didn't have standards. I wanted all of people, and often, I was disturbed and disappointed by what I saw when people were vulnerable with me, but that didn't stop me from fucking.

But in that moment with Vitek, I was assured of my purity. He kissed me, he pulled me close. He suggested we slow down and watch the rest of the movie. Sometimes I think that my fear of being a slut and his complacency and indifference were what made us decide to start calling ourselves a couple.

Very quickly, things changed with Vitek, and we stopped having sex. We dressed up for Halloween, me like Charlie Chaplin and him like Buckethead, and we drank too much and danced with a boy dressed as a grandma at Respectables, our favorite bar. The boy borrowed my cane and said our costumes went together because an old lady would like Charlie Chaplin and he touched my hand when I gave him the cane. And Vitek just watched, not a mad or jealous look on his face, but a look like he was watching animals interact, completely observatory, not at all participatory. I got too drunk to walk, and Vitek carried me, piggyback-style, to the car.

"I can see your underwear, Hitler," someone called, laughing. I wiggled for Vitek to let me down so I could do the shuffling, penguin-like walk to prove I was Chaplin, not Hitler, but he told me to just let it go. He pulled my short black dress down so it would cover my ass once again and by the time we got to the car, I was very amorous and I wanted to get Vitek out of his orange jump suit. Vitek drove us home. He'd only had a few drinks, but he didn't trust himself on I-95, fast and contained by concrete half walls and lit like a plane runway. We took back roads and beach roads back to my apartment.

The whole way home, I pawed like a newly declawed kitten, weakly and imprecisely, at Vitek's crotch. I pulled his pants down halfway. I laid my head down heavy on his lap. Gathered him in my mouth, slobbering everywhere. He arched his back and put his hand under my chin. He lifted my head up and away from him and pulled into the parking lot of an abandoned condo building painted aqua. The look on his face was the same as the look when he told me about his older brother's overdose that happened years before we met. Pained, stretched to the point it looked like it was going to crack.

“You're really drunk, Sloane,” his voice was sad too.

“Let me out; I'm dizzy,” I wiggled at the handle that was still locked. I spilled out of the car, my dress pulled up around my waist because I felt like I was going to simultaneously throw up and pee and shit. My body was hot and sticky. I took deep shuttering breaths and hit my knees on the asphalt as I bent down to attempt to vomit in the manicured bushes. I crawled deeper into the flowerbeds. My palms and scraped knees crushed the little yellow flowers that were scattered and growing around the boxy hedges. After a few minutes of unsuccessful dry heaving, I turned to find Vitek standing there, wavering on his feet as if he were unsure of whether or not it was a good idea to help me. He held my hand and walked me to the car. After showering and brushing my teeth, I laid next to him in my bed. I think he was pretending to be asleep when I told him I was sorry for how I acted. I looped my leg over him and tried to get close and he turned over, continuing to breathe heavy like he was asleep, and he faced away to the wall. We didn't talk about things the next morning at our favorite bagel shop, and we didn't have sex for two weeks.

It wasn't until Vitek that I realized how truly important sex was to me. I would joke with my girlfriends over coffee about only having sex when something good was on TV, or lying there and letting him do his thing. But in truth, I wasn't like those girls. I really did like to fuck. I hadn't experienced this level of intensity yet, but I liked times where it was hard to make it to the bedroom, and why should it be in the bedroom? There was a whole world out there full of places to have sex. I liked my hair being pulled back, my collarbones being bitten. I liked soft kisses afterward, someone collapsing and saying "shit!" in worshipping disbelief and marveling and tracing the shape of my waist with his finger. Vitek was providing the support that I thought I needed in a relationship. Vitek was a wonderful friend to me. We joked sometimes about skipping the whole getting married thing and just moving to where his family is in Czech, being roommates; I would manage his music career. Sometimes, he was the easiest person in the world to talk to. But I needed more. I needed someone who wanted to be physical with me, someone who was attracted to me.

Being with Vitek was bringing back that old feeling I had of being ashamed of my sexuality. Being with him was making me feel unnatural, like an animal, for wanting sex. My insides started to hurt, my vagina felt heavy, my breasts ached. And if we hadn't gone so long without sleeping together, I'd have suspected myself pregnant. But I wasn't pregnant.

#

I go back to Ricky's house that night in January after he gets off work. He has already kissed me, and I know it's wrong, but I go anyway. I drive over the bridge that

opens every half hour each day to let the boats pass, and I hold my breath because that's what you do on bridges. A1A makes me dizzy because the sparkle of the ocean followed by the darkness of the buildings blocking it seems like strobe lights to my heightened senses. Ricky's shadow is in his window, silhouetted next to his ship in a bottle that is covered with dust so it looks like a shadow close up too. He is watching for me, which makes me feel like he might somehow care about me, even though I know that it's impossible.

He will get what he wants, and he would leave. He will say something sweet every few months to watch me squirm, he will invite me over to stay the night after 11pm and we will have sex till we can't move every couple of weeks, and then a couple years later, he will get a real girlfriend. He will write me a letter to tell me the news, to tell me I was good practice for learning to actually love someone. Her name will be Ashley and she will wear crop tops and those sticky rhinestones under her eyes when they go to electronic shows and take molly and dance and fuck and it will all be better than anything he has ever experienced. She will make him Pokémon cakes for his birthday, and they will visit the Salvador Dali Museum almost monthly because of her art. She will be inspired by Dali's surrealism, but she will create obsessive Warhol-esque prints of photos she will take of Ricky on their beach in the evening. Her sunsets are all different colors. I will never meet Ashley, but Ricky will smile and put his arms around her in pictures seen by hundreds on Facebook and Instagram. Something that no one I've ever dated has done.

I will continue to date boys who like to keep me hidden. *Mystery*, they always explain. *It's nice to have something pretty and mysterious all to myself. Who needs to know about us?* Boys who refuse the photographers who only want to document at the entrances to theme parks. Boys who don't change their social media relationship status from "Single" to "In a Relationship." Boys who would rather have a cozy night in than take me anywhere where anyone they know could see me. But I will allow myself to be mistreated over and over, thinking I can change the all the Rickys from boys who call girls at 2am for that reason to boys who will fall asleep with their arms around me each night. But the problem is they are all boys.

When we first meet someone new to have sex with, we are affectionate in ways that don't always make sense to us. We hold hands, we kiss foreheads, we tuck hair behind ears. All hidden in the walls of our bedrooms. We do things we wouldn't dream of doing in public. And when in public, we treat each other like shit for a little while. We hurt each other's feelings, we go out of our way to cancel plans to make sure we are in control. But we feel happy and hopeful when we do sweet things in private. We allow these things to happen because we think it is the beginning of something new, but in reality, it's just the continuation of the same tired relationship characterized by unearned sex and synthetic passion. That's what happens that night with Ricky. I park my car in the parking lot guest space, wondering if that spot would become my regular spot over the next several months (it wouldn't), and I call Vitek. I tell him I'm tired, too tired to go to our favorite bar for his friend's cousin's birthday. But I need him to meet me for coffee in the morning.

“We just need to hang out and talk,” I tell him when he asks why the urgency.

“You don’t think you’re pregnant again?” He sounds like he feels like he should be worried, but isn’t. His indifference is blameless. I have had two pregnancy scares in the time we’ve been dating. I think that it is me wanting to be pregnant to be closer to Vitek. Which is a stupid reason to want to be pregnant.

“I’m, no I’m not. Just want to talk.” We say goodbye, but not I love you, because we haven’t and won’t ever get there. And I climb the stairs where Ricky had hit my ass earlier. The lights in the hotel-like balcony are almost all burned out, but the glare of the ocean reflecting the yellow squares in resorts and condos across the street light my way to Ricky’s doorway, where he’s waiting with his dark room behind him. He pulls me through the door, and I think of all those horror movies where you have to invite a witch or vampire into your house. He more than invites me inside. He bunches the hem of my shirt in his fists and he kisses me again and holds the back of my neck and pushes me toward the bed.

“You want a beer?” There are two sitting on his nightstand already. We suck our beers down quick, and he gets us two more, takes the caps off quick like he’s still at work at the bar. We make a tent out of his blankets and sit facing each other. We share a third beer under our blanket tent, pass it back and forth like a joint or like the last cigarette. My head feels like one of the meditation balls in the blue case on Ricky’s nightstand: a hard outer shell with something moving and clanging on the inside.

“So...” Ricky looks at me expectantly in his half-laughing way to hide his seriousness. I shake my head.

“I can’t,” is all. I add, “not till he knows it’s over.”

“I feel like I knew that.” He takes our empty bottles and puts them out of reach on the nightstand. Stretches out and pats the space beside him on the bed. “Can we snuggle? Or will that offend your moral code?”

I know he’s making fun of me, not taking my efforts to do what’s right seriously. But if I had really wanted to do what was right, I wouldn’t have come to his apartment in the first place. I lay my head on his chest, tapping his heart beat onto his arm with my fingers.

#

A relationship based on companionship and mutual respect could be missing the passion and still be considered a fine relationship by my parents. I had grown up watching my parents respect each other, watching them talk late into the night. But I never saw them hold hands, especially not in public. My father kissed my mother’s cheek on holidays like Christmas and Mother’s Day. I know that it works for them, because they are still together, despite having been divorced once while I was in high school. But that is not the kind of relationship I ever wanted. I wanted sex. I wanted naked naps on rainy afternoons, sex during picnics and driving trips, quickies in the bathroom, road head going everywhere. I wanted lap sits and drunk kisses at friends’ parties where everyone would say “Oh look how cute they are, it’s almost disgusting.”

#

In RESPECT! class, they told us that each time you had sex, it took a little piece of your heart away. They said the more sexual partners you had, the more you chipped

away at that heart. If you had sex before marriage, they warned, you'd have nothing left of your heart to give to your husband or wife when you finally got married. When I heard this metaphor at the age of sixteen, I pictured the heart a slab of stone. Having sex would help me carve a sculpture; it would make my heart original, I justified. But by the age of 22, after I'd been with thirteen boys in less than three years of college, I began to suspect the abstinence education program of some truth. I didn't feel like there was anything left. I kept messing up on the carving and chipping away more of my solidity than I meant to. I felt a rattling of jagged pebbles in my chest where there used to be something more substantial. By the end of my senior year of college, sex didn't hold any intimacy for me. It was emotionless.

The night before I graduated, my roommate had a party. After most people went home, one boy stayed to help clean up the sticky fake wood floors. We wiped the kitchen counters together and finished people's drinks. I was too drunk to think that was gross and he followed my lead. We looked at each other with hazy eyes and lips that puffed toward each other involuntarily, pouting for kisses. We smoked cigarettes in the doorway, watching the other partygoers stumble to their cars. Our bare feet, dirty from the floor, touched at the tips of our toes. He asked to see my room and I said sure. His name was either Matt or Adam. I don't remember which one. My room was all packed up and he locked my door and pushed me back on the mattress on the floor. The pieces of the discarded skeleton of my bed frame surrounded us. His kisses made me think of those pale pink fish who fight by locking lips. He was harsh, and there was absolutely no reason for him to care whether or not he was hurting me. He asked me to face the wall,

get on my hands and knees. I did as I was asked and I felt the skin of his penis inside my vagina: no condom. It took me five foggy drunk minutes to realize it, but when I did, I sobered up instantly. A cold alert feeling. But it felt like one of those dreams where you can't say anything or yell for help when you're in trouble. What was the point of making him stop now? His nails made indents in my hips where he grabbed me. He groaned each time he moved in me. I laid my face down on my arms, bottom still up in the air, and I cried without making any sounds. The muscle contractions of my crying body made him go faster. I think he thought that I was shuddering from an earthquake of an orgasm, but in reality, he was having the opposite effect on me. Still, my body squeezed him and he came inside me. He breathed an appreciative yet scripted *wow*, and when I lay down mechanically, he positioned himself behind me, pushing against me so that when he woke up with a boner, he would be right where he could slide it in. I waited until his breath was slow and vulnerable, and I lifted his arm from my waist. I knew I'd rather sleep on the floor than deal with this artificial intimacy. I had helped create this situation because I let this boy have sex with me. But now I was going to deal with it because despite this experience, I still believed that sex and love should intersect for me. A boy who didn't know my name (he kept calling me Simone) was not going to get to wake up and fuck me. He was not going to get to brush a frizzy piece of hair away from my sweaty, makeup-streaked face and say something like *You look so beautiful* or *It's nice waking up next to you* or *It is now* in response to my "Good morning." When it got to be 10:00 the next morning and he wasn't awake yet, I had a good cry; I washed my face; I jumped on the edge of the mattress. When none of those things worked, I picked

up my Norton Anthology of British literature from one of my boxes of books and I dropped it from above my head onto the floor at the foot of the mattress. That had the desired effect. He woke up and I apologized because I had a lot of stuff to pack, and he asked me if I wanted him to leave. And I paused. But I said yes.

“That was fun.” He kissed my forehead. He walked out of the apartment, and I didn’t offer to walk with him to his car; I wasn’t hungry for goodbye kisses or false promises that we would see each other again.

I think that RESPECT! got it wrong. They said that when you have a lot of sex unmarried, you break up your heart into little pieces and that makes it harder for you to love and be loved. But despite my many conquests, I could still take those small and ugly rocks of my heart and try to make something beautiful. It was my soul that I was worried about. Sex was doing its damage to my heart, and I could deal with that. But I was afraid of what it was doing to my soul. The first time I had sex with Mack, when I lost my virginity, I was in love. I felt safe, loved, meaningful. Each subsequent boy I was with after that felt emptier and emptier. I could have sex with someone, get up, get dressed, find all my belongings, and get out before I accidentally stayed the night. I wasn’t asked (and thought I didn’t want to be asked) to stay. Sex was a means of achieving an end, and after that, it always ended. There was nothing intimate. My best friend’s boyfriend told her once that sex was not emotional, that he felt more intimate sharing a pizza with her than when they had sex. It upset her, but I found myself understanding what he meant. As much as I wanted sex to connect me to someone, the more I was doing it, the more alone I was feeling. I was starting to feel like the African

tribes who fear photographers. I was losing my soul because sex was like a photograph. In my second year of college, right around the time of Ricky and Vitek, I used that metaphor in a poem. Sex is a photograph. When it was workshopped, there was a collective eye roll from my classmates. Still, I felt it. Sex was eating my soul.

#

The morning after Ricky, I meet Vitek in the morning over coffee at the book store by our school, afraid that he will be able to read the kisses printed on my lips from the day before. We collect a few books we want to flip through and we sit down at a table with our coffee. After a peaceful half hour of reading, I tell him that I'm not happy and I'm not going to be happy. He grips my shoulders with his big hands, and just says,

“Sloane.” Nothing else, just my name. I am surprised by his emotion. We sit together for a little while, try to ration out our hangout spots until we can be around each other without feeling awkward: he will get the bar and I'll get the sushi place. We realize that we don't need to do this, and we just hug each other across the table. I think of a French photograph I saw of a couple doing this. Except they were also kissing, and they probably weren't saying goodbye.

I never tell Vitek why we have to break up. I just keep repeating that I'm not happy and that I won't be happy. I don't offer examples or evidence. He doesn't ask for any. He never worries that anyone else was involved in my sudden decision. We just finish our coffee and hug again and he kisses my cheek.

#

When I was in eighth grade, long after I had finished *Lady Chatterly*, my parents broke their peaceful and platonic streak and they began fighting. My mom would go for runs in the evenings, and she wouldn't return until I had been in bed for hours. I would hear her close the door, I would hear her answers, much too quick and light in tone, to my dad's questions:

"At the lakefront, I ran four miles." But my dad would go look for her and her car wasn't always there. The arguments ended with my mom yelling or throwing bowls of seashells, decorations from her bathroom counter, to the floor. My dad would apologize and return to his book, his soft leather chair that was more familiar with the contours of his body than my mom was. He spent more time falling asleep in that chair or on the couch than he did in their bed.

My mom and I were in *Bye Bye Birdie!* at the community theatre. This was toward the beginning of my ninth grade year. Between scenes (I was only in the chorus) I would walk around on my tiptoes backstage, so my soft soled jazz shoes wouldn't echo on the hollow black wooden floor. Because I was too shy to make friends, I would explore. I would look in all the rooms, checking on the props, the 1940s style costumes, the soundproofed rooms where people practiced their lines. I would play a game with myself to avoid the creepy butler statue that actors moved around as a joke to different bathroom stalls to scare each other. They would put rolls of toilet paper and tampons on the tarnished silver tray the statue held, and they would hide in the other stalls to hear people scream when they opened the door.

On one such backstage adventure, I came across my mother in front of the phone outside the dressing room. Her slender neck was cocked to the side to hold the phone gently to her shoulder. Her back was hunched as if to shield someone from the wind. She was laughing quietly, leaning against the wall in a dreamy and girlish way. Despite the soft and silent soles of my jazz shoes, my mother heard my approach. She clicked the phone back to the wall, returned it to its cradle.

“Hey, babes.” Again she spoke too quickly.

“Hey, was that Dad on the phone?”

“What, I wasn’t on the phone.” She didn’t pause to create a question. She rushed through the whole phrase.

“But I saw you.” I should have stopped insisting, but I didn’t.

“My song is in a couple minutes.” She made her way to the wings of the stage, where further conversation would be impossible. I never brought this strange encounter back up, and neither did she.

#

Two hours after I break up with Vitek, I call Ricky. I tell him I’m free, that I’m on the bridge five minutes from his apartment, that I want him to take my clothes off under the bridge by the ocean. He answers in a stale voice that today isn’t really good for him. No day will be for the next two weeks, I’ll discover. He will call me the first night of the third week, and I’ll force myself to wait until the fourth ring to answer, so it doesn’t sound like I’ve been waiting by the phone, so that I’ll have time to down the rest of the beer I’ve been sipping and turn off the black and white movie I’ve been watching

and turn on The Strokes (loudly) and press my boobs up, even though he can't see. I need him to think I'm attractive, and I think he can hear the way my body looks over the phone. When he asks what I'm doing, my voice will shrug.

"I'm just hanging out with some people tonight." Which will be a lie. I'll try to sound drunk, which isn't hard because I will be.

"You want to come over later, like around two when I get back from the bar?"

I'll wait several seconds, long enough for him to whine please, and that's when I'll say yes. I'll immediately jump in the shower and shave everything and wash my hair and I'll put on makeup and I'll spray perfume up underneath my sundress and on the sleeves of my cardigan. Which I'll change out of when I realize I was supposed to be coming to Ricky's from a party. I'll wear a leather jacket and heels and I'll lament the fact that I won't smell like cigarettes and whiskey and being social. But none of that will matter because Ricky will be in his underwear when I get to his apartment. He won't notice or comment on how I look. Our interaction will be like a business transaction: you take off those clothes, and I'll put this inside of you. The exchange will be equal. He'll invite me over that threshold again. He won't need four beers to get me down to my underwear. And I'll feel worse than disappointing my dad by breaking my abstinence contract in high school. Because when I glance down at Ricky from my perch atop him and try to look in his eyes, they will be hollow, wooden, mechanical. Like pieces fit together in a machine without a soul. His eyes will look right past me while he grabs my waist in a deceptively intimate way.

And there will be nights where Ricky and I will visit Respectables, the place where Vitek watched me dance with the boy dressed as a grandma on Halloween. Those nights, Ricky and I will get drunk and fling sweat off our bodies. We will clutch our heads like fever when our favorite song by The Strokes comes on, we will dance on the stage, we will kiss where people can see us. And on the way to the car, Ricky will put his hands under my coat and he will clutch with cold fingers the warm and secret skin of my ribs like he's trying to dig to my insides.

## THE BREAK-UP BOOK

My friend Donovan tells me I'm cursed and I believe him. We are sitting in his bedroom and I am 21 years old and he is 28 and it is October. He sits in the doorway of his closet, taking off his shoes. This is the closet that he once told me he'd like to "take you home and keep you in, so I could pull you out like an old picture and look at you anytime I want." If anyone else but Donovan had said it, I would have been alarmed. But for some reason, when he said it, he just sounded like the lyrics to a Modest Mouse song. I told him so, and he laughed and told me he never wanted to be a musician. He wanted to be Hemingway 2.0. He didn't say that last part, but I just figured from my previous conversations with him that this was the case. His writing was all compact and concise. His characters were brave.

But about the curse: "How else can you explain losing that same book twice, both times to ex-boyfriends?" Donovan swats my hand away when I reach for the worn copy of *A Confederacy of Dunces* on his bookshelf. I take it off the shelf when he goes to the bathroom connected to his room. He closes the flaking white door, whose paint is waxy in hue.

"Yeah, but couldn't it be a coincidence?" I stretch out my legs and smooth the book's cover in my lap. I think about the women who hold babies like that, stretch out their legs and lay the little ones in their laps.

"Never loan books to anyone," he evaluates me, perhaps in an expectant way. "Especially someone you're fucking. No, I'm serious," he points two fingers familiar

with holding a cigarette at me. “You don’t lend books to people, especially not people that you’re fucking.”

“You’ve got a lot of confidence, pal,” I laugh because we haven’t had sex. We haven’t kissed. We have hugged once, between classes. I think that this is Donovan’s way of ruffling my hair and calling me “kid,” his way of reminding me that he is older and wiser, the adult in this friendship with advice to give.

Donovan goes on to explain his instructions. He makes us a pot of coffee, hugs a cigarette with his fingers, and leads me to sit on the porch. When Donovan was very young, “about your age,” he makes sure to qualify, he loaned one of the Hemingway books in his shrine to a girl with nice tits and he never saw that book again.

“When you get to know a book” —he has probably appropriated this quote from somewhere else— “it’s like a lover’s body.” He runs his fingernail along the freckles of my outer left thigh. “There are just certain curves and scars and crevices that make you comfortable.” I move my leg away from his fingers; his hand is star-shaped as he stretches his fingers to touch me.

Perhaps I move my leg away from Donovan, but there had been other boys and there had been times I hadn’t moved my leg away. And my dad would be disappointed if he knew how I let boys treat me. My dad is part of the old school way of thinking, that you take a girl out on a date and get to know her. He tells me that my mother is the only woman he has ever loved. My dad gets embarrassed and upset if someone forgets to bring their change of clothes to the bathroom and sneaks through the house in a towel after a shower. When I was a kid, if I went in his room to ask him a question while he

was folding laundry, he would hide his underwear in the basket so I wouldn't have to see it. He's the kind of guy who has sensibilities.

My dad does his bills, his morning coffee, his poetry... all at the end of the table in the dining room. It drives my mom crazy, because he has a desk, but doesn't use it. It's a nice desk, the kind Nancy Drew's dad probably had in those stories. Dark wood, a glass top, drawers that open with smooth, deliberate clicks.

"All I do is dust it! And he keeps all his books on top," my mom confides.

That's something I really love about my dad, though. His books take over whatever space he inhabits. Three sets of shelves aren't enough for him. The fragile, feeble-spined favorites rest on the flowered loveseat in the front room, where he feels most nostalgic and contemplative. The crisp, sharp newcomers await their first read on the counter next to his briefcase; they are his companions during boring meetings. And all the books I've ever given him as gifts are displayed on his dresser, the first place he looks when he gets up in the morning.

Since my father's desk is unavailable for desk activities, he does much of his work at the dining room table. Bills and receipts are stacked in piles that make sense to him, as are hard copies of emails he needs to answer. Books find their way here too: the ones he likes to offer quotes and advice from at breakfast time. They occupy the sixth seat at the dining room table, the extra, because no one uses that one.

Last time I was home, I found a sheet of paper from one of those tiny spiral notepads that make me think of detectives. And on that sheet of paper, my dad had written: Jude: Surfboards, Jesse: Watches, Sloane: poetry books/notebooks.

At the top of the paper, it said “My Will.” My first reaction was to suck in air so fast that the air conditioning bit my teeth. Then, that air moving to my brain offered a clear thought: Crumple up that piece of paper. Make it meaningless. If he doesn’t have a will, he can’t go anywhere (my flawed logic; lots of people had gone away without writing down what they wanted to happen when they died, and even if they did, their wishes were often disregarded and ignored and even changed). Then, I started crying. No one was home except me that day. I thought about my dad’s choices. Trusting me with the physical enclosures to stories he had memorized and loved for longer than I’d lived. I’d watched him be so gentle with books, tender in a way that he’d rarely physically been with people. There was an intimacy he had with his beloved books that was made more formal when he translated the gestures to humans. He took me to Barnes & Noble a lot growing up. If I snuck up on him on the anthropology aisle, I would see him leaning shoulder first against the shelf, ankle casually crossed over ankle, toe touching the floor, the way a boy might lean against a girl’s locker when he likes her in high school. With that just-developed confidence. His attention was solely on the volume in his hands. Or on the poetry aisle: when I peeked around the shelves, his head was bowed over the book, like he was in church or something. Gentle. My dad taught me to love books that way too when I was little. Then I found my own way.

Donovan has different thoughts on ways to love books. Perhaps there’s a distance I detect, a cold quality. Donovan’s books are clean and new looking, but he reads them with hungry eyes, appraises them for secret techniques that will bring him success as a writer. Seeing him read before our classes is different from seeing my father read. When

my father reads, he appraises the pages with a gentle appreciation, a reverent gratitude. The way he looked at my mom when her hair started growing back after the chemo was finished.

Donovan and I talk about what happens when you lose a book. Starting over with a new book is learning a new body, creating scars again and trying to get it like last time, even though you know that you might not go back to that restaurant with the weird orange sauce that stained page 82 when you touched your favorite word with a sticky finger. Used books are even harder to trust than new books. When you don't recognize the origins of their scars, it's hard to appreciate them. It's easier to resent them.

You lose a lot when you break up with someone. If you have something big of theirs, like a TV, you give it back. Or break it. Whatever you do, you do it because it's the right thing to do in that situation. But sentimental things often get lost. Or one person is embarrassed to return them, and the other is embarrassed to ask for them back.

When the first boy I ever loved left me during our first year of college, I picked the coldest day of the year to do my makeup and straighten my hair and push my tiny breasts up in a padded bra and put on my favourite tight shorts and purple tank top and flip flops. I looked like I was going to the beach, but it was a bitter January day. I had called him the night before to tell him I knew what his shirts from China and his film books meant to him. I had offered to meet him and return his belongings, and he had said yes. I sprayed his shirts with my body spray, held them to my pressed up chest, and I kissed the covers of all the books. I placed these items carefully in a Victoria's Secret bag (also sprayed with perfume) and I waited for him in the lobby of our dorm building.

He brought his best friend, who smiled sadly at me when he saw what I was wearing and almost invisibly shook his head at my pathetic display. They were both wearing North Face jackets. The windows were fogged with humid cold. But I was sitting dressed in barely anything on a geometrically patterned couch with my back curved in a backwards C, an arch, so my boobs would stick out further.

“Here’s your stuff,” I said in the breathy voice I’d been practicing moments before, as I watched salvaged and haunted clips of Marilyn Monroe interviews on YouTube.

“Yeah, thanks,” he smiled, also sadly, at me. He didn’t hand me a bag scented with his half cologne, half cigarettes-smoked-in-secret smell. He had at least two pairs of my underwear that had been lost under his bed when we frantically got dressed when his mom banged on the door at home or his roommate came in at school. When we were together, he would find them and send me pictures and texts like “Look what I found under my bed this morning ;)” He also had a long, rectangular book with a pale blue and black cover that discussed all the different kinds of camera angles and shots. There were drawings that looked like the safety instructions on an airplane or illustrations from 1990s sex ed books. I was using it to learn and practice so I could finally start making some of the laughably bad silent films I wrote with reverence in my journals. I couldn’t find that book anywhere. He still also had a journal of letters I wrote to him while he was away in China the summer my mother was in the hospital. I never got any of my stuff back from that boy.

When I left the second boy who told me he loved me, I had a sweatshirt from his university, a towel from when he was on the swim team, and a Bob Marley shirt he got from a tourist shop at an airport in the Honduras.

He had my first copy of *A Confederacy of Dunces*. The book had a broken back, and page 31 fell out sometimes. I remember because page 31 got caught in the breeze one time. I chased it across a pool deck, slipped, and bruised my hip.

When I met this boy, Zach, at my friend Rose's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party, we sat under a fake palm leaf umbrella in the courtyard bar, listening to reggae and sipping fruity drinks that tasted blue. He passed the good music test, so I asked him the question I ask on all first dates: "What do you like to read?"

I should have been wary of the amount of time he hesitated in his answer.

"I like to read things that teach me how to live."

I was drunk, so that answer sounded good to me, good enough to kiss him behind a hibiscus plant thirty minutes later. Despite his "Shit! Jimmy Buffett! That guy knows how to live!" comment that was punctuated by an awkward hand gesture, that thing that people do when they touch their thumbs to their middle fingers and make quick snapping noises by flinging their hands through the air. I don't know what that's called.

Part of the reason I broke up with that Zach was because when I saw his bookshelf, I was disappointed. It was, like everything else in his room, covered in dust. The books (I don't remember which ones), aside from their dusty coat, were in pristine condition. Not a folded down page or anything. And they weren't that way because he took care of them. They had been read no more than once. Some not at all. I could tell

because of the way they cracked in stiff protest when I opened them. They'd been on this shelf with only each other for company for so long that they didn't remember how to be read. Only one small row on that shelf contained books. The other shelves displayed trinkets, water cups, religious figurines. His guitar was dusty and in a corner. He'd not learned.

That boy was a starter, not a finisher. He'd never completed anything. So I don't know what I expected when I handed him my copy of *Dunces*. The first copy, the one I loved the most. I'd already loved my copy to pieces in the short time since my friend Mikaela had introduced it to me during one of our slow afternoons working out our college writing center. And I didn't want my beloved Ignatius anywhere near those stiff and unfamiliar characters on Zach's shelf.

"How do you like it?" I asked a week later. We were in the gym together, doing his work out plan that would last just three and a half weeks.

"I like it, I like it." Zach began a set of hyperextensions and changed the subject when he was done.

"Where are you in that book I lent you?" was the question two weeks after that conversation in the gym.

"Right after the part where his mom drives into the building. Ignatius, that guy," chuckled Zach. I was concerned. His bookmark had been snugly on the same page/in that spot for a couple weeks now. I was beginning to suspect he was not reading.

Because the best way to make it seem like you've read more of a book than you have is

to say “I’m right after the part where…” because you can be on that part and say after and it makes you sound more dedicated. I had learned that.

We stopped talking about the book, but Zach struck a definite blow when he helped me move into a new apartment in Boca Raton when the school year started again. When carrying my beloved boxes of books up the steps, he indicated *Ella Enchanted*, my favourite childhood story, at the top of a pile of special books.

“You should get a new copy—the cover’s about to fall off.”

That made me sad because it’s when I knew that our relationship was doomed. He was helpful. But he didn’t understand how to treat books. He thought they were replaceable. When we broke up, he cried and told me not to be cruel; he was appalled that I could talk about giving back his swim towel, his college sweatshirt, his Bob Marley shirt from the Honduras without my voice shaking. I didn’t cry or offer to drive up to Saint Cloud to give him a hug. Maybe I was cruel. Maybe I didn’t know how to live life like Jimmy Buffett. But I do know that I never got my copy of that book back. So Donovan is right. Never lend books to people you’re fucking.

But even before this conversation with Donovan, I was beginning to think that there was something weird going on with that book. A month into a strange back and forth relationship situation with my friend Ricky, which happened a little bit after Zach, I lost the book again. I remember it was a few days after I had been over at Ricky’s new apartment for the second time since I had helped him move that summer. I did nice girlfriend things for him, like waking up early and helping him move and bringing him blueberry bagels and painting the walls in his apartment so they’d be this warm, egg

yolky colour that looked nice to him when he was high. I read to him lovely excerpts of *Dharma Bums* when we relaxed in the chairs on his balcony with whiskey drinks at dark. But Ricky was not ready for a girl to like him the way I did. And so I made a mess of our friendship, which could have been close. I was reading *Dunces* again because when I saw it in his room it made me miss Ignatius; after I saw the book in Ricky's room, I broke down and bought a copy from the Barnes & Noble by school. Because the copy was so new, because I felt shy with it, I immediately set to wearing it in. I rolled it around in my hands, trying to make the spine more flexible. I wanted it to fall open to my favorite page on its own, as if by magic. I stretched it and crinkled pages, I fell asleep on the lawn with the book open on my chest, I got page-sized tan lines on my skin. I declined to use a bookmark because I wanted to fold down important pages. But for all my careful touches, the result was not successful. The book was still new, no matter how much I battered it. The wear I inflicted on it was artificial and bizarre-looking because it had not come naturally with time. The second book could not replace the first. That's why I lost it.

About a week after I got the second copy, I was at the beach near Ricky's apartment in Deerfield and I had a story I wanted him to look at. I looked at his music often and I wanted his opinion. In hindsight, I see that it's immature to have wanted him to read the story, because Austin, the girl protagonist, and Grant, the boy, greatly resembled the two of us, and the story ended with Austin getting pregnant and Grant kissing her forehead. No dialogue. It was an awful story. It was what I foolishly wished for at age 20: to hold onto Ricky by getting pregnant. That day at the beach, I got a text

from Ricky and he told me to come over so he could look at my story. I was in such a hurry that I forgot my towel and book. Even my shoes. I ran to his nearby apartment, almost clearing the wooden boards that led to the parking lot, dancing on the asphalt to avoid broken glass on my bare feet. I figured I could come back to the barely crowded beach and collect my things later. I saw Ricky's black car in the parking lot. But when I knocked at his door, there was no answer. I looked for movement or shadows behind the closed blinds behind the ship in a bottle in the window. I called him and he didn't answer. I sat and waited in the patio chair like a sentry at his door, or a bouncer at a bar. The shadows outside changed. I finally got up and walked back to the beach. My towel, damp from an earlier dip in the ocean, was still there, but my book and my purple flip flops were gone. I looked in the sand around my towel, but the book was nowhere around. There were so many sets of footprints in the sand near my towel that it would be impossible to identify the culprit. And besides, how would I know who to look for? The people coming in and out of the beachside bars and restaurants, any of them, the boys playing Frisbee or climbing into a truck that littered empty beer cans when the door opened, any of those people could be the person who stole my book. Why leave the towel and take the inauthentically ragged book? I walked too slowly on the wooden slats that led to the parking lot and I got a splinter in my big toe. I drove home and drank a whole bottle of wine by myself. I did ballet positions on my swollen toe, liking that I could feel the splinter wiggling around in my skin. I was punishing myself for being stupid again. Ricky sent me a text message late that night calling me "babe" and apologizing for the fact that right after he asked me to come over, his friend picked him

up and they went to lunch. He had forgotten to tell me. But I already wrongly connected him to the theft of my book. If he hadn't asked me to come over, I wouldn't have lost that book. I know that was wrong, but it felt right to me.

When I was a freshman in college, I would hang out at the writing center after working there all day so I could talk to Mikaela. She was a grad student at the time, and I was enthralled by her. I'd get excited and jumpy whenever she was around. And I'd cling to her like I was a younger sister. After work, we'd go to this Mexican restaurant on the train tracks by Dixie and take goofy pictures by the painted "Tequila toilet" outside. She'd buy me beer, but would never drink any herself because alcohol reacted strangely with her antidepressants. She thought she was an alcoholic, but she'd only ever been to one meeting, long enough to get that chip and get out, she told me. She diagnosed and cured herself of her addiction.

I guess I just wanted her to be my older sister, and I also wanted to kiss her a little bit. Infatuation might not be the right word, but it's the first word I can think of, the only word. She spoke in this voice that was still shadowed by cigarettes she'd smoked years before, and she shook and flitted sometimes from the long-term effects of past experiences with drugs I didn't know the names of.

At the writing center one night, I was deep in conversation with a regular, an old woman who, depending on the day or the weather or the season, had been either a victim of human trafficking in the Ukraine, or had spent a peaceful childhood on an Indian reservation with her anthropologist father. Her name was Sarah. That night, Sarah and I were writing a letter to the CEOs of Target warning them that she was going to sue them

after slipping and falling in a local South Florida branch. “Right near the Starbucks part, put that in there.” Sarah wanted her letter to be passionate, yet well-informed. She wanted me to proofread it while she told me stories of the little black boy she had recently taken in as a foster child. She had no pictures; he didn’t like to be photographed. I smiled to myself, despite the fact that we were already four minutes over our time. I didn’t mind sitting and listening to an old lady tell me stories that weren’t necessarily true; I had never really gotten to have that experience from my grandmothers or older aunts.

Mikaela locked the back door and began shutting down the computers. She and I often closed up together. She got on the phone to call Night Owls, which was a school service which provided golf carts to take students to shadowy parts of parking lots late at night. We loaded Sarah into a golf cart and stood together in front of the door, waving to her.

“We look like we are parents saying goodbye to our kid going off to college,” she laughed. We reentered the Writing Center to put away the sandwich sign no one looked at and make sure all the lights were off. I plopped down on the comfortable, but probably mite-infested couch.

“Hey listen, I have something for you to read,” Mikaela opened her brown fake leather purse that was peeling and grey underneath and rummaged, avoiding my eyes. Mikaela wasn’t good at being sentimental. She stiffened when people tried to hug her. She shivered once when a boy touched her arm at a bar one night. Not shivered in a good way, but like she might vomit. Even Frank, her fiancé, was not immune: when he tried to

kiss her, she pursed her beautiful lips and clapped him on the shoulder like he was a platonic old buddy. I had learned, from all these things, to admire Mikaela from afar. That is why she liked me.

She took the warm yellow book from her purse. There was a green ink spot along the side of several pages. She rubbed the front of the book to wipe off an invisible smudge. I think it was her way of being gentle and affectionate.

“This is my favourite book. I read this in high school because my teacher gave it to me. Now I want you to read it. It’s one of those books that makes you laugh and cry. It’s really funny and really sad.”

I trusted Mikaela because her phrases and her favorite movie had already rubbed off on me.

But it was my dad who taught me how to love books. Every holiday, he gives me books with messages in his tiny handwriting in the top left inside corner of the cover page: “As you advance in your academic career, remember how much I love you—enough to be seen buying a Shakespeare book” inside a book of sonnets. Things like that. He always supplied bookmarks, showed me the way to properly shelve books. Loving them meant respecting them.

Once, at a college garage sale raising money for a trip to Seattle, I found a book someone had donated. I don’t remember what the title of the book was, or what it was about. I only remember that on the inside cover, in cursive that might be described as spidery, someone had written: *To my son, good luck on your next step. Love, Dad.* I couldn’t believe someone would give that book away. I wanted to buy it, but I forgot to

look for it at the end of the garage sale. So it was either sold for a dollar or was donated to a damp and musty shelf of a library.

Donovan and I sit on the couch and talk about the right way to treat books. He reads them with his eyes, only with his eyes. He regards them with a cold and suspicious distance, the way he is with people, he says. He reads them to see what they can do for him.

I consume my books. I slam them down on beds, across tables, against walls, and I read the hell out of them. I break their backs and make their pages curl. But when no one's looking, I breathe in their sometimes ancient scents. I close them gently and run the back of my finger down their spines. I kiss their covers before I fall asleep. Sometimes, they stay in bed with me, open on the pillow when I fall asleep in the middle of a chapter. When I was young, I lined up my books, not my stuffed animals, to protect me in my fear of sleeping alone in the dark. They were the walls to my castle; they were my friends.

With my books, I am fiercely monogamous. I never read more than one at a time, unless I have to for school.

Donovan relegates his books to his nightstand. And I see several with neat bookmarks in them. One on his desk, two on the nightstand, not touching. One on the porch, next to his ashtray. One in the bathroom. And a thin Mary Oliver sits waiting for him on the kitchen table; he likes to have coffee with her in the morning. It bothers me a little bit that he treats his books so coldly. That there are no visible signs of love on these

books. But it brings me comfort to know that Mary wouldn't be much interested in Donovan either, should he passionately love her in secret.

"If you had lost it once," he turns my chair to face him, "I'd just believe that you were stupid. But you've lost it twice. That means you're cursed."

John Kennedy Toole, in his dying breath, instead of saying something brilliant and profound and something that would make me laugh then cry with only a loss of breath like I'd been punched in the stomach as a transition, instead of all that, laid a curse on me. Donovan laughs when I tell him that but he nods. He takes a sip from his water bottle that shows me that there was a time when he did drink a lot of beer, too much beer, like he'd once told me. The bad days before eight cups of coffee per day and cigarettes that should yellow his teeth more than they do. He just holds his water bottle like a beer bottle, like there is more weight to it, like the substance inside would give him both courage and stupidity to touch my leg again.

"Do other strange things happen?" he presses me.

Years later, I would take a jewelry box from a half burnt down house I snuck into and became convinced that it was filled with evil spirits so I would my boyfriend at the time, Kyle to take me back to the house to cautiously say an apology prayer. But I don't know that yet, so:

"No, not that I can think of."

"You're still cursed, Sloane. The universe does not want you to have that book."

We are sitting on his balcony watching people turn out their lights and go to bed. We are making up stories for them to live in their lives. He is smoking a cigarette that

has replaced his more dangerous addictions and I am looking at the photography book to which he had written the preface. I have asked to borrow it.

“No, I’m serious,” he points his two fingers holding a cigarette nub at me.

I think of the bright yellow cover, the juvenile drawing of a fat man in a warm red jacket and a green cap. With an impressive moustache and a rubber chicken dangling precariously from his shoulder.

“I mean,” Donovan takes a punctuating sip of coffee, “think about it.” Another sip of coffee, thought-sized. I think.

“I know.” I hate the way my voice sounds, small and submissive.

“You can’t borrow that book because I’m going to let you have it, when I get more copies,” he indicates the photography book with his new cigarette and pushes the base of my patio chair with the arch of his foot. “That way, you can’t steal it from me.”

Donovan’s copy of *Dunces* was on a shelf by his bed; I saw it upside down when I lay looking for ceiling shapes with my head hanging over the edge of the bed. He was in his closet taking off his shoes, and it would have been so easy to snatch the book off the shelf and hide it in my big purse beside me. I was envious of the bright yellow color and the smooth spine, and I wanted to take it from Donovan, love it as my own, to soften the pages by reading and rereading them. I reached out to touch it and he reappeared from the closet, swatted my hand away. Grabbed my wrist and shook it and twisted it away.

When I leave later that evening, holding the heels I’d mistakenly worn under my arm like a Christmas package in an old movie, I also pretend I am holding Donovan’s

copy of *Dunces*, pretending I have the courage to take that book again. But Donovan hadn't taken it from me, so why should I take it from him?

Too many times, I've rebought *Dunces*. The first copy, the one I lost to Zach, was with me for several years; I'd creased it down the spine with gentle fingers. I'd carried it to many lonesome lunches and gotten hummus on it at least once. It had even folded a certain way from how many times I'd hugged it to my chest. After Zach, I had to start over and court a new copy from its never-opened stiffness, the one I left on the beach by Ricky's house.

Doing it any more would make me feel like a whore. I'd feel the same way I did when I realized that I no longer owned a copy of *The Great Gatsby*, that I wanted to have one to reread before the DiCaprio blockbuster came out in theatres, and the only copies available had his face and Carrie Mulligan's on the cover. Which I didn't mind because I love the sight of them, but I was embarrassed when I bought it from the cute boy named Diego at the bookstore because I knew that he was thinking that I was a bandwagon reader and that I had no real intelligence in my head. I didn't want Diego to think that. I didn't want him to think that at all.

I leave Donovan's house and hug an imaginary book to my chest. In a couple years, I will loan the book to Kyle. My beautifully worn copy that conforms to my body better than any dress because I hug it to my chest. I will give it to Kyle to read one night after we get too drunk and watch *Lost*. We will lay in bed chest to chest, our shirts off, our favorite way. Me on top of Kyle. I will tap his heartbeat as I feel it with my fingers on his shoulder and he will write me notes on my back with his finger. Maybe it will be

the whiskey or the *Lost* marathon or maybe I'll just feel really close to Kyle, but that night, I'll feel compelled to share something with him. I'll jump out of bed and bring that book to him, holding it in front of my chest like a hymnal.

"I want you to read this," I'll tell him, looping my legs through his. "It's my favorite book."

Kyle will kiss me and tuck the book carefully into his bookbag, and he won't even read it. Unlike Zach, he won't even fake his way through. He won't even pretend to be reading. A couple weeks before our breakup, he'll admit to me over the phone that he didn't like it. He'll say it's because he reads Game of Thrones books and it isn't his style to read books like this one. I will blow up at him, tirading about how he dragged me to nature preserves and science museums and that I watched *Lost* and he never would drive by the Kerouac house with me so I could jump out of the car and touch the front door, and he never watched *American Movie* with me. And he wouldn't even read this fucking book. Why couldn't we have anything at all in common? He will be silent on the phone and I'll know that despite my bad behavior, I have won the fight this time around.

When we give our books to others, we are handing over a power, a magic. We are giving away our imaginations, our diaries, our possessions that say something about who we are. One of our greatest escapes from the mundane or stressful or sad, and we are giving them to others. I make it a point to give books as gifts, to give stories is to give life.

I think that the reason my dad's decision to leave his books to me someday when he's gone hit me so hard because my dad has been such a monumental part of my

development as a reader and as a writer. He sat there and listened patiently the first time I struggled through a book aloud. He was also there the moment I decided to become a writer. Books have always been sacred for us, a means of connection, even when we agreed about little else.

I remember it happening over a whole season. Winter. When I was eleven. The idea was slow-moving, syrupy and warm as it dripped through my mind. I decided that books were going to be my life during a Christmas shopping trip with my dad.

In our identical tiny handwriting, we had lists of the presents we were going to buy for people. We had it planned so that we would spend one hour shopping, thirty minutes at Barnes & Noble, and still have time to eat at Beefy King before it closed.

I remember that I was thinking about the name Jacob as we looked for a place to park. Even though I wasn't too close to anyone called Jacob, I felt like there was one out there with blonde hair and a dusting of freckles on his nose. I kept getting this image of Jacob in my head, standing in front of a window, looking at a piano, with his hands quietly in his pockets and a red stocking hat on his head. The name filled me with this swelling and familiar feeling, this sense that I wanted to call him up and ask how he was doing. I wanted to make sure he was okay and I wanted to hug him even though I didn't really like boys yet.

“Dad, have you ever read a book about a boy named Jacob?”

“Maybe,” my dad clicked on the blinker but a car on the other side of the aisle took the parking space instead. He calmly moved on. “I've read a lot of books. What happens in this one?”

“I don’t think it’s been written yet.” I told him about the image of the boy in the window by the piano shop. I explained how I felt.

“Well it sounds like you should write it down, honey,” we were almost a mile from the mall, in the outer parking lots usually used by tour group buses full of people heading to Bath & Body Works after a day at Disney.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I think so. I would read it if you wrote it.”

Later that day, Dad bought me a purple journal from Barnes & Noble. He gave it to me as an early, secret Christmas present. Inside the cover, he wrote:

*To Sloane, for your future as a writer of many other stories like Jacob’s. Love,  
Dad*

And so *Jacob’s Christmas Gift* was my first creative endeavor that spanned more than a couple pages. I filled a yellow spiral notebook (saved the purple journal for my final draft so I wouldn’t mess up on the creamy pages) with notes and revisions on a plot that Lifetime Movie Network probably already recycled seven times before I was born: A boy who lost his dad wanted a piano for Christmas. His mom was a cheerful artist who went on a date with the proprietor of a piano shop. The piano shop owner got in a terrible car accident and was in a coma, but he woke up to tell the boy that he would get his piano for Christmas... and a new dad. He then asked the boy’s mom to marry him from beneath the thin hospital sheets. She dropped a vase of flowers and ran to his side, crunching over glass and the boy ran all the way to the piano shop to hug his piano.

My dad read every version. He woke me up early on weekend mornings so I could sit with him at the dining room table. We would drink our orange juice and give each other things to read. I read his poems; he read about Jacob.

He wrote down the addresses of literary journals from the big book of submission guidelines at the bookstore and slipped them into my notebook.

When I was 15, I had a big fight about school with my dad while I was cleaning my room and I tried to hurt him by throwing my purple journal in the trash.

“All my writing is shit!” I had the hiccups, but I tried to sound mean.

When I came home on my first visit from college, I voiced the shitty writing concern once again in much calmer tones and Dad showed me that he had kept my purple notebook; he dug it out of the trash, cleaned off the coffee grounds, and kept it for three years. He gave it back to me, and it sits safely in the top left drawer of my desk. I read the note on the inside cover when I struggle with my writing. For a long time, notes on the inside covers of books were the most successful means of communication between me and my father. Now, they are the most precious. Someday, I will look after his books when he leaves them to me. I’ll take care of them the way he does now.

I dreamed a couple nights after I found my dad’s will that I was dying and I lay in my bed and people lined up out the door, through the hall, through the living room, into the streets, and they all waited as I distributed my books. I looked at each person who had made a pilgrimage to me, as if I were some kind of a guru up a snowy hill who granted questions as currency, as power. I gazed upon each face. Some real, some dreamed up. And I handed out books. Sometimes there were entire boxes, sometimes

piles, sometimes, I handed a single tattered book. Books that almost glowed and felt like heartbeats in my hands.

## HOW TO PUT A COW BACK TOGETHER

25. I don't know where the adults will take the giant mass of unmoving fur made heavier with the absence of life, but I hope there is a place for her to rest, to be covered with leaves and rich soil. From inside the house, I can't know what the adults are saying as they struggle to lift the dead thing into the truck bed.

24. Far from me, out in the pasture, I feel like I see Prampa's large hand, only a little weaker than it used to be, gently hovering, barely touches the cow's back. But that's not possible, because he's not alive anymore. I hold my little sister's hand.

23. David stands there, not doing anything.

22. He climbs from his truck and leaves the door open. The truck isn't one of those fancy vehicles with the chimes to remind the driver that the door is ajar, but from my place looking out the window of the French doors, I hear that chime in my head. I want David to close the door so I can see.

21. Before David gets out of the truck, I imagine that Prampa kneels down to bumper level. I picture Big Grandpa, my Prampa, trying to detangle the cow's already blood-soaked skin and hair from the sharp metallic twists of bumper. No one sees him but me. The other adults touch the same parts of the cow's body with smaller, less gentle hands.

20. We're inside because my mother makes us. Through the cool, air-conditioned breeze coming from the kitchen through the back porch, in the fading warmth of the afternoon.

19. She takes us from the expansive backyard, past the small garden, past the aloe plant.

18. She springs over on her tan balletic legs and plucks me from the dirt, where I pretend to be a flower. She grabs my sister from the swing.

17. My mother has jumped from her sun chair beside the swing set.
16. The cow's stomach rips open. The metal hooks into her chest.
15. There is a cow attached to the front bumper of David's truck. This cow is lightly-colored, like the beginnings of a toasted marshmallow. And I do not remember what to call her because the generation of cows being born this year is the first that we name; we were too young before this. This screaming cow is Smoky's mother. She is the cow who is always the last to arrive at the fence, but who nuzzles me with her nose and licks me with her rough tongue. The mother cow who is sweet and patient and who always lets my sister and I pet her when we bang watermelons on the fence posts and yell for the cows to come to us from their hiding places in the woods.
14. Out in the pasture, there is a scream. Not a human or a cow sound, just this universal signal of anguish.
13. David isn't paying attention and I hear a weird and solid thud as the front of his truck hits something. The tires of his secondhand truck are thickly coated with manure and earth.
12. David drives in hypnotic circles in the pasture, smashing and smearing cow patties with the powerful tires.
11. He has plenty of space on our land, so nothing bad should happen.
10. My uncle David has just gotten a used truck and he is eager to show his family how it drives.
9. In the dirt, I look for wiggly worms; I say the spells I've learned from my fairy book I got for my fifth birthday last month and I pray for forests to grow around me, filled with

animals I will rule over and command on crusades against child-baking, candy-house-building witches.

8. I will redeem my favorite stories by erasing the sad events, like my grandpa dying.

7. I touch where I think my pancreas is and ask God to take Prampa's cancer out.

6. Take away whatever darkness is in his pancreas, which my mom tells me is below the stomach.

5. We find out my grandpa is sick.

4. I go back through home videos to hear my grandma's voice before her brain is destroyed by chemicals and cancer cells, before her breasts are cut out.

3. I am the curve of my mother's stomach, a seed swelling in her womb, the second heartbeat from the Phil Collins song she hears the day she finds out she is pregnant.

2. Prampa and my grandma argue about David, after he breaks a window on their family car as a child. I fix the window.

1. Repair shingles on hurricane-battered roofs, undent smashed cars, unbreak bones, dig up bodies and restart hearts, open closed eyes, reattach tree trunks seamlessly to stumps.

## CARPIDEIRAS

The boys want to be close like siblings are close. Some boys with siblings remember the unparalleled experience of being able to call an immediate truce when one kid got in trouble, of having a secret language none of the parents understood, of having someone's bed to jump into after watching *The Blair Witch Project* for the first time. Boys haze in fraternities, I think, to simulate an actual sibling experience, all of the torture and rewards that go with it. They tie each other up, they put bags over each other's heads, they listen to hypnotic songs from the seventies, and they stand for ten hours. Together. Those unrelated boys who meet in college haven't had a chance to deal with the traumas they face with their own siblings growing up: the divorced parents, the nights where the whole house shakes with fights and the kids find solace and solidarity under someone's bed with a flashlight and a stack of picture books. They don't get to experience the family funerals together, or the house gatherings afterwards, where the counter is lined with rectangular foil boxes and Corningware bowls of cheesy casseroles from which the kids steal bites. Those funerals where the adults read sad poems and eulogies and sit together while the kids fidget and wonder when they will be allowed to go out and play in the backyard without it being "disrespectful."

As siblings, then, the boys must catch up, those fraternity boys, they must bond in that most tragic of ways. And I think it works. I've seen my own brother treat his fraternity brothers as if they are family. They wear each other's clothes, fall asleep in each other's beds, share secrets about sex. When it boils down to it, I can tell they really love each other. And maybe all the shit that they go through helps them prepare for

tragedy, the practiced bonds to each other show them how they will react if something truly awful were to happen.

The night before the police found Ryan Uhre's body in an abandoned and crumbling Tallahassee building less than a block from where he was last seen, my brother dreamed about him. He dreamed they were in a parking lot and Uhre was excited and he said, "Jude, I'm back!" It's like he was saying goodbye or warning Jude that they would have to say goodbye. Jude remembered that dream when another friend called him out of class and they gathered at the fraternity house to make plans and arrangements, to take down their Facebook pleas for help bringing their brother home.

The details didn't matter. It didn't matter that Uhre's body had been, for two weeks since he was last seen on February 2nd, in a building mere feet from where he was last seen. It didn't matter that the Tallahassee Police Department was searching for him in South Florida, due to a mistaken cell phone ping and a false report that he had been seen in a Ft. Lauderdale club. It didn't matter that Uhre frequently disappeared like this and that his brothers worried only after five days of not hearing from him. That he was gay, only out to some people, and hiding it from others. It didn't matter that an older man was seen following the same path Uhre had taken moments after on the security camera. It didn't matter that Uhre's cell phone had been shattered, that his father allegedly denied the police access to his Grindr account. It didn't matter that none of this mattered to the police, that they closed their investigation after his body was found. That they didn't suspect foul play in his death. Because he had died within minutes of falling after he entered a second-story window of a building that had no second-story floor. He was a

story high into the air when he fell. The second story landing from which he'd fallen was furnished with a chair, littered with beer bottles and cigarette butts. Had he gone up by himself to look quietly out at the stars over the capital city? Or had he gone to meet someone in secret? Did it matter, since he was dead? It didn't matter that this building hadn't been searched; no one saved him in time. None of this mattered, and all of it mattered. All of the details. Because what mattered most was the fact that Uhre was gone. That he was dead, and that because he disappeared while wearing a Hawaiian shirt, his friends were asked to wear that kind of attire to his memorial service. It only seemed fitting, they agreed.

When my brother Jude and I were driving to our parents' house on a Friday night soon after Uhre's death, Jude saw one star cutting through the thick clouds, and he told me that maybe it was Uhre.

"It sounds cliché, I know," he shrugged. "But I feel like he's looking at me now. I feel like that all the time." Then there were more stars when we got away from the light pollution, and Uhre was joined by all sorts of different souls, some brighter, some fading out, some flickering. Eyes in the sky. Jude taught me about the constellations and pointed out the planets we could see at this time of year, and we listened to Lynard Skynard: After all this time gone by / Now I sit here and wonder why / Yeah—I'm still here and baby you are gone. We sat on the hood of his parked car, felt the rumble of the engine like summer thunder beneath us, windows rolled down so we could hear the music. We were parked in the former pasture across from our neighborhood. Someone had bought up all the land, moved the cows, and had started a neighborhood. But ten

houses in, they went bankrupt and left the remaining lots to the tall Y-shaped weeds and the neighborhood kids who pretended it was an enchanted forestland. One house had not made it past the concrete blocks foundation stage, and it was rotting before our eyes. In the past my brother and I talked lazily about the fact that we had both had sex with different people in that abandoned neighborhood. It was the kind of relationship we had. We could talk to each other about the difficult things, the private things, the embarrassing things. It was the reason we were sitting there on the hood of that car, talking about a boy who had just died. Jude laughed in the way people can only laugh when they have lost someone they care about. A laugh of appreciation, of reflection, of realization that you'll never see that person you lost again. He told me funny stories.

“We'd always go to this bar where the bartender was gay,” he smiled. “And I think he and Uhre liked each other. Uhre would always tell him to flirt with me to mess with me because I never got grossed out or weird. I'd always play along. He was fun.” This was the kind of conversation where I knew to keep listening. Jude wanted to talk, and I needed to listen. About two songs later, Jude wasn't laughing anymore. His eyes filled with liquid light, like the moon moving over the water of the pond near our car. An intensity gripped him and he gripped my shoulder.

“I'm going to live the kind of life Uhre would be proud of me for living,” He announced. “He was always telling me ways that I could improve, like by getting a girlfriend and settling down. I know that he really cared about me because he wanted things for me that he didn't always want for himself. He took care of me. Kind of like you do, you know, since you're both older than me. I'm gonna get married and have kids

and tell them stories about the guy who would have been Uncle Uhre.” Jude’s going to teach science and history and look through the telescope and point out the stars to anyone next to him.

My brother’s age and his passionate disposition cause him to be fickle sometimes. He will fall in and out of love with a girl almost overnight. Sometimes overnight. He will be drawn to a girl because of her knowledge of Lord of the Rings trivia, but he’ll be turned away by her principle of skipping books and watching movies instead. My brother changes his mind a lot, but the area where he is unwaveringly loyal is in his friendships. My brother has more friends than anyone I know. This is because he collects them everywhere he goes. He does not often have disagreements and he makes people feel special. Guys a couple years younger him practically worship him, and guys older than him take him under their wings and try to harness some of his crazy energy into something productive.

Jude is the reason I begin to think about grief and the ways we express it or create it. I can see pain genuinely written on Jude’s face, a solemn signature on a piece of paper describing everything that has happened in the past few weeks. I trust in my brother’s friendship with Uhre; since they met, I have heard stories about bar adventures, late night conversations falling asleep on the fraternity house couch, costume parties. But what about the people who barely knew Uhre, the ones who would show up and mourn him like a lost brother, the guys who would bow their heads till their chins touched the knots of their ties, the girls who would check their makeup for tears when they were sure people were looking?

After that night with my brother, I looked at the FIND RYAN UHRE Facebook page. His fraternity brothers had posted pictures of him in bathing suits in kiddie pools, in tank tops holding thumbs up, in formal wear attacking a steak with a butter knife. Uhre in his signature Hawaiian shirts. They posted pictures of tea light candles glowing and shaped into the letters of his first name. Those who had been his close friends, the boys in every picture with him, wrote tributes, citing memories of his sense of humor, his affinity for Walt Whitman quotes, his boundless love for his friends as evidence of their closeness to him. Troublesome, though, was the fact that others, people who didn't know him, were posting comments about him like "I didn't know him, but I have a brother who was friends with his brother. His death hit me pretty hard." Many said something to the effect of "I didn't know him, but I felt cheated, like he could have been my best friend, so his death is really affecting me." There were girls who sat in the third row of his class the second week of school, girls who never talked to him once, who held candles at his vigil and wailed and wore their synthetic grief around their necks like big fake gaudy jewelry. Something that had so little to do with these people was being turned around to suit their need to feel sad about something, and to get attention for that sadness. It's a common phenomenon. People don't pay attention to someone while they are alive. The night that my brother's friend Uhre died, they had all been at a bar together watching the Super Bowl. If Uhre had bumped into someone on his way out of that crowded bar, he might have gotten a rude response. But a few weeks later, when his body was found in an abandoned building that had been gutted by fire a few years before, the person he bumped into could claim that he was "hanging out with Uhre the night he disappeared." I

don't know if any of that happened. But it's such a common occurrence; someone dies and people who didn't know them in life suddenly love them.

But what I want to know is why this happens. Why do we feel the need to claim a little piece of grief that belongs to someone else? We do not envy others their losses and hardships. We do not wish for the brief, blissful moments upon waking filled with the hopeful and impossible thought that the dead are living, followed by the swift and lasting disappointment that they are still as gone as they were before. We do not want the exhausting days of sorting through smelly costume jewelry and sweat-stained baseball caps and photographs, those days of packing the life of the deceased into cardboard boxes, cleaning the house to sell to someone who won't need to or want to know that someone died here. So why do we find ourselves wishing to be part of other people's tragedies?

I remember getting picked up early from school on September 11th by my friend Jenna's mom. It was raining and Jenna's mom got us pizza and we watched the news even though she kept trying to put on a Mary-Kate and Ashley movie for us. Looped and smoky footage of the buildings crumbling, the screams, people running like in a disaster movie. Later that evening, when the initial chaos had subsided, I found myself wishing to be squished in one of those survivor hugs that was happening in the street; I wanted to be one of those people crying and comforting each other.

Years later, after the Boston marathon bombings, people I knew who had traveled there a month before or moved there a month after talked about their proximity to the disaster. "I was almost there during that time," they would marvel. "I almost saw it

happen. I was just a couple weeks off.” It may be because it’s natural to think “What if?” What if they had been there? What if they had seen people getting their legs blown off? Ballet teachers who lost legs?

We crave disaster, and I do not know why. Blockbusters feature cities in peril, armies of superheroes, armies of armies, fighting wars where people will definitely die noble deaths saving the others. In movies, we see the end of the world, and we shiver with anticipation. We picture ourselves martyring to save our loved ones and it makes us feel brave. Does the same principle apply here, when it comes to grief? Why do we feel we need to take some of other people’s grief upon ourselves when they don’t ask us to? Are we so selfish that we want it regardless of what the grieving want? Are we startled at the way we make connections, the way that the dead remind us that we and our loved ones are not far behind in the grand scheme? Do we think that fervent participation in the grief for someone a little unfamiliar to us will help prepare us or safely distance us from the necessity of grief for someone we love? Are we practicing for disaster? Preparing ourselves for tragedy by trying to take away the surprise? Or do we want to believe that grief can bring us together, make us stronger? Do we feel like we are participating in something larger than ourselves?

Social media makes everything worse. Hardly anyone I knew had a Facebook when a kid I knew in high school died, so any of the posturing of grief had to happen in person. But at least those people made some sort of an effort to be present at funerals and memorial services. That means they had to dress up and show up. With Ryan Uhre’s death, happening as it did after the advent of social media, people were able to casually

drop comments like “I knew him briefly and I prayed for him” and “I didn’t know him, but felt the loss as if I’d known him all his life” and “I don’t know him other than the news, but I just want you all to know how hard this hit me. I have been so down, I could hardly get out of bed for a day or two” and even “I live in Tallahassee.” People who had never seen him the night he ate spaghetti out of a bowl with a towel draped around his chest like a toga over his formal wear so he wouldn’t get sauce on his crisp Oxford shirt. People who didn’t know the stories his friends had experienced with him. People who were so desperate to make a connection that they would try to take a sadness that didn’t belong to them. Maybe it felt right to them, maybe it even felt cathartic. But from my end of things, from my perspective of seeing this happen again and again, it feels a lot more like that scene that plays over and over in history, where the fat greedy man stabs the earth with the flag and claims the land that doesn’t belong to him.

An article on the politics of death and Facebook mentions that societies, and in particular, Western societies, think that individuals can overcome grief by emotionally distancing themselves from the dead. But I think that it works in reverse too. Western societies think that individuals can participate in grief by bringing themselves closer emotionally than they actually are to the dead. A woman who lost her partner to lymphoma and saw people’s reactions on Facebook bitterly called it “social necrophilia.” One acquaintance, in a desperate attempt to make a connection to the dead woman, posted on the Facebook “Now you’re in heaven drinking champagne with my grandpa!” This was not a welcome condolence to the surviving partner. She said that her girlfriend had been sober for ten years and was an adamant atheist. She marveled in disgust at how

little people knew about the woman they were trying to mourn. Of course, there is the fact that people are inherently awkward with tragedy, often not equipped to deal with it. They don't know what to say in the face of experiences outside their own, even when they are well-intentioned. Still, from the perspective of the loved ones dealing head-on with loss, the hangers-on seem to be doing everything they can to make the loss personal and about them.

That's mostly what Facebook really is, anyway. A depthless pool for reflection-gazing narcissists. And Facebook makes it really hard for the families who want to keep their loved ones' deaths quiet during the grieving process. When a person dies, it can be handled in one of four ways on Facebook:

The family may choose to leave the Facebook profile untouched. This makes the profile vulnerable to friend requests and wall postings, including "Happy Birthdays." This is how my Aunt Wendy's profile was left upon her death of lung cancer three years ago. Thankfully, no one posted posthumous requests to get together and have lunch, but it was eerie to see how her Facebook suddenly became a ghost town. No one dared to try to communicate with the dead. We all knew she was gone already. It's like we all had an unspoken agreement to freeze time around the day she died.

Similarly, the family of the deceased can continue to operate the Facebook after the death. If they have the password, or if they obtain it through a court order, families can sift through the digital memory boxes of the dead. Families who already have the password, families who don't inform Facebook of the death, can continue posting in the name of the dead. Studies have shown that this can be therapeutic. A gradual letting go

of the dead can take place. Leaving the message feature intact can help friends and family members. They can write open letters like diary entries expressing their regrets and their love for the person. Getting it all out can help. It's like my mom, after her parents' deaths, calling their house and hearing that hope of a ringing telephone before that phone number is disconnected or given away to a stranger. But troublesome is the ability or temptation of the family to write back, to take on the persona of the dead to comfort family members. That's why there are such strict privacy laws surrounding death and Facebook.

Another choice a family can make is to present Facebook with a death certificate or an obituary and have the Facebook transformed into a memorial page. Certain features, like notifications about birthdays, friend requests, and personal messages, would be disabled, and the Facebook would become a place for friends and family to share photos and memories. In theory, it sounds like a nice idea, but in practice, the narcissism takes hold and people are celebrated for sharing their memories that make the person's passing about them. Photos the dead can no longer approve for nice hair and pretty smiles, but who cares, as long as the surviving person in the picture looks good?

The most discouraged of post-death maneuvers is to deactivate a dead person's Facebook. But you probably already knew that, since Facebook is so hard to deactivate in life. A Facebook can never be permanently deleted, only deactivated. Facebook tends to push for the memorializing rather than deactivating of a dead person's page. If the family makes the choice to deactivate, a death certificate must again be presented. The internet as a whole makes it very easy for people to claim grief that isn't theirs.

When Caylee Anthony was missing, a nonprofit group called Texas Equusearch organized Orlando community members into a search team that scoured the woods near the Anthony home for any trace of the tiny girl who was already buried beneath the ground. Neighbors who did not know the little girl in life swept flashlight beams between each tree, trampled undergrowth, moved in organized and synchronized paths looking for clues. They slurped sodas and ate sandwiches that created bread crumb trails that didn't lead to the lost child. After the little girl's body was found, a juror on the murder trial was dismissed because he had been a part of the search team, and he was sharing details from his personal connection with the Anthony family. The juror was disciplined because of the connection he had made in his volunteer work.

My own cousin wept when she watched the news that Casey Anthony had been arrested.

"She didn't do it," my cousin insisted. "I met her at a Halloween party a couple years ago, and I know she didn't do it." My cousin had never met little Caylee, but she cried each time the photograph of the chubby cheek resting on the palm appeared on TV. Then, she excitedly pointed to the TV when they showed a picture of Casey smiling dressed in a Queen of Hearts Halloween costume, a short and low-cut black dress with tiny cards framing the bust.

"I was there," she would raise her voice. "I was there!" She clung to that Halloween party connection as proof that she was part of this, that she was part of something large, larger than herself, large enough to make the news on a national level.

And I think that's what it is sometimes about. The internet provides us a way to be morbidly famous when we sink our sycophant claws into someone's death.

After Casey Anthony was found innocent in court, a website specializing in "morbidbilla" claimed to have a pair of "murdering mama's" jeans. They were trying to sell them for \$800. Since ancient times, our civilization, our species, our society has seen grief as profitable, as lucrative, as a way to make money off those weak suckers who actually feel while we pretend to.

In Ancient Greece, female mourners put on shows at funerals because death called for a performance. Something tangible: songs that didn't have to sound pretty because voices wavering showed pain, thrusting dances made by bodies slinging sweat, screams erupting into tears. Ancient Egyptian women were paid to follow funeral processions, wailing and screaming in grief. We can see them in paintings on the tomb walls, covering their eyes, gripping their hair with both hands, massaging their temples, reaching towards the sky. All in white dresses and long black hair. All in agony bearing a sadness that wasn't theirs. In Ancient Israel, women had the job of preparing a body for burial. In biblical times, this is what Mary Magdalene was doing symbolically when she anointed the feet of Jesus with perfumes and wiped them dry with her hair. She gave herself, her hair to honor him, and she was ensuring an honorable burial by preparing his body before his death without knowing it. At a certain point in Ireland, women knelt over bodies before burial. They rocked and clapped and wailed. In Ancient Rome, women kept watch over the body at night before the funeral. Maybe they talked or sang to the body, stroked a person's hair. The funeral processions were led by paid actors.

This still happens in many parts of the world. These professional mourners donned portrait masks of the dead person's ancestors, telling stories about who that person was. Animal sacrifices were performed, and a portion of the cooked meat was left on the grave, a portion was burned for the gods, and the remainder was eaten through tears by those at the funeral. Modern day China expects women to show respect for the dead. They function almost as funeral directors, helping to guide the grief of friends and relatives of the dead. But the practice is disappearing. Paid professional mourning has been around for centuries in Asia and some of Europe. The idea has always been to make a physical manifestation of the grief that the family feels, but is uncomfortable or unable to show to others in public. Sometimes, the lamenters would be physically unclean as expressions of grief, dirty bodies that reeked of sadness. Families hired (and sometimes still hire) actors to express what they all genuinely felt but couldn't show.

The difference between the continuation of ancient practices and the more modern approach of plastering a Facebook page with "RIP, he was my best friend" statuses is in the intentions. Perhaps people participating in professional mourning traditions receive compensation, but when we look at photographs of women in dark hoods bellying up muscle-tightening cries, we see something there that is real. We see an adherence to tradition, a concern that a funeral happens the right way. Many funeral customs come with fears that if bodies are not buried properly, the souls will not be able to pass over to the afterlife. Ancient Greeks put coins over the eyes of the dead to help them pay the fare to cross the River Styx into the underworld. When we close the eyes of the dead, it's like putting invisible coins on their eyes. We shut their empty eyes to this world, and we help

to transport them to the next. Funeral rituals stem from some sort of belief that we, the living, are helping the soul, inexperienced in this kind of travel, move to the next world. The funeral must be done properly, practices must be observed, and most of all, the dead must know that they are missed. The idea of professional mourning seems to center on the idea that if we living do not help the dead, they will be lost to wander a world they are no longer a part of.

People who mourn those they didn't know in real life on Facebook receive a different kind of compensation. They receive attention, and I've come to think that is more valuable to people than other kinds of currency. People take Andy Warhol's words about all of us getting our fifteen minutes of fame to heart, and every minute spent publically grieving in a digital cathedral is a moment closer to reaching that fifteen minutes. There is something about appearing to have overcome a great personal tragedy that improves a person's sense of self-worth. Social media offers us the opportunity to do that. And it encourages us to forge virtual intimacies with people we may not even see in our actual lives, with features like "People you may know" based on quantities of friends in common. Social media is about numbers: how many "likes" can you get on a photo? How many followers? How many friends? How many best friends can you claim, especially when they are dead and can no longer speak for themselves about who their best friends really were?

I don't think that all users of social media are greedy and phony by nature. But I certainly think that social media offers a shield, a safe haven of a computer screen. A

stage, a platform for people to profess calculated responses of grief to unspeakable and unpredictable tragedies.

My dad has told me before that he is very glad that Facebook wasn't around when his friend Joe Whitney died. We use people's full names when they die young. Joe Whitney. I've never just called him Joe. I've always been very interested in Joe Whitney, and I often asked my dad to tell me stories about him when I was growing up. Joe Whitney had reddish brown hair and an easy smile. He was an athlete and he had an academic scholarship and he was seventeen when he was going home from work one night when a drunk driver hit his car head on and killed him. My dad and his friends called each other until everyone had been informed and they sat and thought about what was going to happen. The brightest star of their generation had just been extinguished. They wondered who would guide them the way Joe Whitney did so effortlessly. I don't know much about Joe Whitney's funeral; I know my dad is reluctant to talk about his death. I know that my dad keeps a memoir half-written in his desk drawer called Seven Days. It focuses on seven different days in my dad's life growing up in a small neighborhood near the airport, off Semoran, in Central Florida. It begins with middle school, with a baseball game with the neighborhood boys in a field littered with used condoms. It ends with Joe Whitney's funeral. He's never let me read that part. But I can't help but feel that what I'm doing now is appropriating grief that doesn't belong to me. When I write about Joe Whitney, I'm writing about someone I never met, never asked for advice, never hugged at a Christmas party. But I've imagined how different things would be if Joe Whitney were still alive. I've wanted him to be alive, not just

because he would be alive, but because maybe my dad's group of friends would not have become broken and disjointed. My dad's friend Jerry would be more than our dentist we see twice a year and recycle conversations with, he would be my dad's friend still. We would have grown up and learned to surf with Art Littlefield's sons. Joe Whitney would have married, probably a gorgeous woman with thick auburn hair styled like Farrah Fawcett or a goddess. He would have had kids, handsome sons I would have had a crush on, I'm sure. He would be Uncle Joe. Because he was so nice that he kept an entire group of friends together. They kind of crumbled over the years without his presence, and perhaps I'm idealizing Joe Whitney because he died when he was young, but it's hard for me not to. In this essay, I've exploited my connection to Joe Whitney, I've taken that grief that doesn't belong to me and I feel like I should give it back. Like I should wrap it up in some crisp paper and tape down the corners and leave it on his parents' doorstep. They, along with my father and his friends, are entitled to grieve for both Joe Whitney and his sister whose name I don't even know who died a couple years after. I am not. I do not own their sadness. When I think back to my childhood, I sometimes wonder what my dad was dreaming about when he would nap, arms crossed as if for the coffin in front of his chest. His face would look sad, and he'd look unsure of where he was and what he knew when he woke up. I wonder if he was dreaming of Joe Whitney.

Funeral home directors are paid to embalm, dress, make up the faces of the dead if that is how we choose to leave them, in boxes. They are paid to set out rows of chairs and to stack them and fold them away into closets when we leave. Chairs that are for viewings or memorial services filled with "I met this guy when we were nineteen and he

was my best friend” speeches. Funeral home directors are paid to point flowers in the right directions and to lead families to the correct cemetery plots in black hearses. There is nothing wrong with this job, but it is that: a job. Funeral home directors keep a respectable distance from death and do not seem to share our grief when our loved ones lie there in front of us. Funeral home directors ask us gentle questions about what outfits and they sew up holes— death wounds and cancer ports are hidden with makeup and church clothes. And then they close the boxes.

Funeral home directors are not weepers, criers, screamers, lamenters, wailers, mourners. They do not pull their hair and tear their clothes and clutch at their hearts and beat their fists to their chests and heads.

So who fills this role? Who takes a piece of our grief without asking and holds it up like it’s their own? And what do they get out of it? There is a modern-day business in the United Kingdom called Rent-a-Mourner. The company, according to its website, provides “professional, discreet people to attend funerals and wakes” and offers to “increase visitor numbers or introduce new faces.” Mourners are, as they were in ancient times, paid actors. And they take social cues from the people who hire them. You want them to cry, they’ll cry. You want them to sit in the back, faces covered mysteriously with lace veils, they’ll do that. They will pretend to be old friends with complicated histories with the dead. They will rehearse how they met the deceased so that they may tell stories to the real folks at the funeral. How is that any different from the people who glom onto others’ grief? Beyond these businesses that deal in death and the sadness that goes with it, I think people still do what those paid mourners did all those centuries ago.

People today do it for free.

Perhaps because of our species' history of demonstrative mourning, we feel that it is natural for us to react dramatically to deaths that touch us in very small ways. My first semester of college, my boyfriend at the time received news that his friend Sean Carrion had been in a terrible car accident, and after a couple days in a coma, had died. The accident had happened on Nova Road, a 27-mile stretch of two narrow lanes with a speed limit of 60-mph that served as a shortcut to the beach for impatient high school students. I don't remember the exact details of the accident, but I think that Sean was merging off of that awful road onto 1-92, the main road through Saint Cloud. He was so close to safety. But something happened with a trailer, and he suffered a really bad head injury, the kind that people don't recover from.

I didn't know Sean that well in high school. I remember that he was one of the few friends of my boyfriend's that was genuinely polite to me rather than treating me like Mack's girlfriend who was taking up his time. He had nice arms and he wore black tee shirts often. He and Mack played music together sometimes; I remember watching once or twice, perched atop an extra amp. Sean had a quiet voice and he gave warm hugs. But still, I didn't know him very well.

When we found out, I sat on Mack's bed in the dorm room he shared with his friend Matthew. The two of them ran around the room filling duffel bags with stone-washed purple and red tee shirts and black skinny jeans and moccasins. I reminded Mack of things he was forgetting in a low voice, and he nodded, adding underwear and sweaters to his bag without folding them. I hugged Mack after we carried his and

Matthew's bags and his guitar to his Jeep. I asked just once if he wanted me to come, to sit in the back row quietly at the funeral, or even just drive him and Matthew the three hours home from Boca Raton. But Mack said no, no it will be okay, and he kissed me on the forehead. I didn't argue because I knew it wasn't my place to. I felt sad that Sean was dead because he was dead, and that was sad. I didn't have to attach my feelings to knowing him or being close to him. I knew and could trust that it was sad. I cried the night after Mack and Matthew left. But I would not be one of the glittering hundreds from our graduating class who claimed a relationship with Sean I didn't have. I wouldn't say that, because he smiled across the table at me at Burger King when we accidentally touched feet one time, we had "almost been together." I wouldn't be one of those people hugging and crying at Sean's funeral, one of those high school boys who Mack was disgusted at because they had never even spoken to Sean, yet they were all claiming they had been best friends, almost brothers with him. Girls who had danced with him once at a school dance in the beginning of high school who couldn't go on without him. The girls and boys who didn't know Sean's eye color or favorite band but sought the arms of grief counselors who were brought to the high school. Those kids who arranged for excused absences due to borrowed trauma.

I was not one of those kids. But I was still guilty. At the funeral, Mack and his friends played Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" and now every time I hear that song, Sean pops into my head. I didn't know him well enough to have songs reminding me of him, but it happens. One time, my dad and I were surfing and he was humming that song. We sat up on our boards, legs in the water, watching for the next set.

“That’s a really sad song.” I hit the water with my palm and watched the ripples.

“Yeah,” my dad agreed. “About someone selling out.”

“But I thought it was about someone dying.”

My dad shook his head. I can still see why Mack chose that song for the funeral. We’re just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl year after year. That song was a connection point of loss for anyone involved, anyone who even remotely knew Sean. It became Sean’s song.

I think that the kids from Sean’s funeral had good intentions, deep down. This was a tangible way for them to feel sad, to release any potential loss they had built up inside them. They were young, and many of them had never faced any kind of death before. They were practicing, preparing themselves for what it was like to grieve for someone who meant a great deal to them. Should they have practiced on a nineteen-year-old boy they barely knew? Probably not, but where else were they going to get the chance to see what it felt like to lose before they actually lost?

My grandmother died when I was fourteen and two years later I had my first creative writing class. I wrote a story about the day my grandmother died. It was the first time I had ever been in a room with a dead body. She had been in a coma for a couple of days and we gathered on Labor Day, six days before my birthday, in her room where hospice had been keeping her barely alive for a couple of months. Her room that had been nondescript, an old room in an old house, identifiable as hers only because of the figurines of snow babies and the thickly dust-covered photo frames. Those traces of her were no longer there because her room had been transformed into a hospital room.

The bed with the silver bars to hold her in took up most of the space. Her trinket-covered dressers were cleared off and blocked by the machines that helped her heart beat and the ones that helped her lungs expand and contract like sad, rattling plastic bags. Nothing of her true self remained in that room once hospice came. And that Labor Day, they called and told us you better come up; today's the day. I brought a pastel drawing of some blue flowers I had made using a church bulletin as a model. She had always liked the pictures on the front of the programs at our church. I wrote her name and mine on the corner of the paper in black letters, almost hidden by the brown table I had drawn to hold the flowers. Before going up to see her, my dad asked me if I was ready because she would look different. I didn't know that different meant coma, so I said yes. I talked to her about the times early on in her illness, right after my grandpa had died, that we sat in this room and I read her Nancy Drew books, we watched Casablanca. I touched her papery, scaly arms, I guided her scraggly-nailed fingers toward the pastel chalk drawing so she could touch the texture and feel the flowers I had drawn her. Her eyes were closed and I imagined I saw her mouth corners twitch up. I really thought she could feel me there, but her mechanical wooshes of breath were an indication that she was already gone, an indication I didn't pick up on at the time. I massaged her temples and my cousin Melissa cried and in a gravelly voice told her that "Grandma, baby, it's okay if you let go, we'll be fine." And eventually after what felt like hours and three cans of Chek Soda my aunt kept in the fridge, my grandma did just that. The male nurse checking her vitals looked at his watch and around the room. He took her pulse and frowned. I didn't know this at the time, but she was already dead.

“Sweetheart, can you flip that switch behind you?” He looked at me and pointed behind me to one of the machines keeping my grandma artificially alive. I stiffened and pretended I didn’t hear him. How awful it would be to flip that switch and hear her stop breathing. I’d feel like I had murdered my grandmother. My dad put his hand on my shoulder and he guided me and my cousin Dan out of the room.

“She’s a kid,” he reminded the hospice nurse in a firm voice. “That’s her grandma. Don’t ask her to do something like that.”

Dan and I walked fast down the brown linoleum hall, but we still heard the incredible silence that came with the lack of the robot breathing machine. Dan winced and covered his ears. I squeezed his arm and we joined his brothers, Ben and Josh, on the back porch. Despite my shock at what I had just been asked to do, I recognized my role as the oldest and tried to take care of my cousins. I grabbed us another round of Chek strawberry sodas from the laundry room fridge. When I got back to the back porch, my oldest cousin, Melissa, was standing in the screen door, scuffing her nineties sneakers through the dirt. Her baggy ripped jeans and flannel shirt hid her tiny frame and her long red hair hid the tears on her face. I knew they were there, though. She smoked a cigarette quickly, with a strange nervous energy.

“Hey honey,” she acknowledged me without looking back at me. “She’s in Heaven now.” Melissa’s voice was thick like a sore throat with tears she hadn’t released yet. Dan looked down, I started crying, Ben crushed an empty can, and Josh looked at all of us. Josh was the youngest.

We went into Grandma's room one at a time, a Davis family funeral procession. We each said goodbye. I hugged my grandma and kissed her face, and I could feel that she was dead. There was something missing; she was heavier, but also more of a shell. When I later told my friends that I kissed her cheek after she was already dead, they would think it was gross, but they didn't understand. During my turn, I placed the chalk drawing on her chest and folded her hands over it. I knew that she would be cremated, that we wouldn't choose her best dress for burial or get to see her sleeping in her coffin, but I desperately wanted this picture to stay with her, to be mixed in with her ashes. Melissa spent the longest time in with Grandma, out of all of us cousins. She spent longer than her half-sister, Heather.

Later on, when I ate an Italian sub at Firehouse with my dad, he told me that it was because Melissa viewed our grandparents more as parental figures.

"When your Aunt Wendy had Melissa," my dad explained, "she was still very young. She wasn't ready to be a mom. She wanted to go to parties and dress up and have fun. She left Melissa with Grandma and Grandpa, and they kind of raised her." When my dad was in high school, Melissa was always around. She clung to my dad's neck in piggy back rides and demanded stories and viewed him as a brother.

At Firehouse, I thought about what I would write in my journal later. I ended up writing a melodramatic poem that day: "I'll never know if you heard me telling you to let go and / not to hold on any longer, / But that's what you did later that day. / When you took your last breath, and your mouth went slack, / Mine opened in a silent scream. I'd just like you to know how much I miss you." I had not been the one telling Grandma to

let go. In my head, I knew that she had to. But I was terrified, and Melissa, being older than me, understood that she needed to let her grandma die. But I took ownership of that maturity, of that difficult statement. I claimed the grief as mine, my story, mine to write about. But was it really mine to exploit in my writing? I had never been particularly close to my grandmother. We saw her a couple times a year on holidays, and we dreaded going to her house on teacher work days when my parents were at work because her house was so boring to us as kids. If the grief belonged to anyone, it belonged to my father, his sisters, and it belonged to Melissa. People who had relied on my grandparents more than I ever had. As a kid, I had enjoyed watching old movies and eating strawberry ice cream with my grandma. I liked hearing her sing “I never promised you a rose garden” while she cooked little German foods for us. But I never needed my grandmother the way my father and his sisters did, the way my cousin Melissa did. Perhaps I was just dealing with my grandmother’s death in my own way, but I felt it wasn’t fair for me to use this grief for my grandmother’s death to enhance my own story, to make dramatic claims about my experience that were not true, like “it will be hard to go on without her.”

I think that the reason this issue hits so hard with me is because of my choice to write primarily in the genre of nonfiction. Everything I write has to come from real life, and so I find myself filing away the stories of nice things that have happened to me, days of perfect sun, the time I found out I had been accepted into the college of my choice, my first kiss. People crave conflict in the same way that they crave disaster and the chance to be martyrs. People crave conflict in the stories they read and the stories they write. In

my first nonfiction workshop, surrounded by the whisperings of drug addiction stories, abusive relationships, divorce, I found myself frantically searching and wondering “what has happened to me?” That’s why I write a lot about my mother’s battle with cancer when I was in high school. I write about my viewpoint on the whole thing, but is it really my story to tell? The answer is no. It is not my story.

My mom’s high school friend Jack got a similar kind of cancer to hers, around the same time. They talked about their medicines when they stood in the front yard, watering the flowerbeds. My mom got better, while Jack did not. And on the day we drove up to move my sister in to college, Jack’s wife Anna called my mom to tell her that Jack was dying. She asked my mom to come over. By the time we got to the front room where they put his bed, he was already gone. His mouth was slanted, slack in a way that the self-awareness of life would never allow. His bed was surrounded by his family and friends. Mostly women because the men gathered not talking in the living room in front of the TV with beers. Women I’d never met, women who knew my mom, surrounded the bed, rubbed his limp arms, cried. They were like the Irish women who wailed and rocked while preparing the bodies.

I touched Jack’s hand; there’s an electricity, a constant buzz in people’s bodies that we don’t realize until we touch the dead. We don’t know it’s gone until we miss it. We don’t know how to miss it, and we learn.

I hugged both John and Anna, and about ten people I didn’t know. Offered whispered condolences. Then we left, drove up to UCF, and moved my sister into her first dorm room. We ate at Tijuana Flats that night. John and Anna probably didn’t eat

anything. Because that's how true grief is. It's exhausting, sometimes crippling. Borrowed or claimed grief allows you to keep moving on, telling people "One of my mom's best friends died. His name was Jack" while you're eating a chimichanga and thinking about what you're going to wear tomorrow. Real grief stops you in your tracks, however briefly. Claimed grief, appropriated grief, becomes a part of your repertoire of emotions that makes you more complex. Understanding that allows you to share grief rather than to steal it. Understanding that softens you to the possibility that grief can be shared rather than rationed.

When there are reports on the news of a child or teenager's death, my parents cringe because they are parents and they are teachers. They feel sad without claiming grief for themselves. They feel sad because they make connections; they imagine themselves in the position of those grieving parents. They are sad not because they crave a way to publicly touch that tragedy. They are sad because even though they do not know the family of the dead child, they know enough about loving their kids to know it would be a horrible thing to lose a child.

I would like to think that this connection, this sense of empathy is what drives high school and college students to attend the funerals of fallen members of their generation who were unfamiliar to them in life. I would also like to think that we think that our grief can bring us together, make us stronger by combining it and uniting. Participating in something larger than ourselves is something that we all want to do. But I know better than to be so optimistic. In this age where men who kill their wives post Facebook statuses about it, people desire ways to gain recognition for their trauma.

Even if it is not their trauma. Social media makes us all narcissists, and death brings out that narcissism. People are all about their own stories. Life's best stories involve loss and overcoming that loss. And perhaps when people don't have enough loss of their own, they find that they must take loss from others to satisfy their stories. It's not all that simple, of course, but sometimes, it is. Modern people continue the ancient practices of taking on and performing the grief of others. Except now, people are not paid actors, and they pretend that the grief is their own, that it is more than symbolic. In this essay, I have written about Ryan Uhre, about Sean Carrion, about Joe Whitney, about Jack Owens, about my grandmother. And I do not feel okay with any of it. I express my sadness through my writing, but my sadness feels borrowed. I feel synthetic when I try to put it down on paper. I do not own any of this sadness, and I don't feel like I should be allowed to even try to make something beautiful from it. Upon waking up, a guy I recently spent the night with told me that he thinks people only listen to each other so they can say the next thing they want to say.

“People only have conversations with one another,” he told me, pulling me closer to him in bed, “so that they can respond with one of their own stories. People connect everything back to themselves.”

I don't remember the next thing I said. I may have tried to be funny, saying something like “Well that reminds me of a story about myself.” But I remember agreeing wholeheartedly with his sentiments. So we are humans, and our way as humans is to connect our experiences and the experiences of others back to ourselves.

Our brains are designed to help us practice for disaster. When we think bad thoughts (car crashes on I-4 with our children in the car, house fires in which our elderly aunts burn, our mother's cancer coming back) we think we are crazy, but we aren't. This is healthy behavior. Our brains are preparing us for these disasters before they happen because some of them are inevitable. Most of them are not, but we will lose. So perhaps that's all we are doing when we grieve unnaturally, for deaths that do not involve us. We are practicing externally for sadnesses we will face. Maybe making connections is our only way. We crave a way to plug in and be a part of our human race. Being connected makes us feel safe, like loss is a network of people connected and together. Like loss isn't an individual and sometimes excruciating journey down a path alone. Perhaps that is what we pretend when we take the grief that isn't ours to take.

#

A moment earlier outside I thought the sky looked purple instead of black and I heard a bird and I felt calm, like stars had to be souls. His energy is somewhere. Think about what you can do to honor him, I wanted to tell my brother. If you need to, drink, and if you need to, fuck, and if you need to, yell. Lose control if it's necessary. But realize there's a moment when you will know you have to do something. And doing something good for someone else amidst your grief is the hardest thing to do. It might be your composite picture attire being a Hawaiian shirt and lei because he preferred those clothes to suits and ties. It could be a charity drive or a scholarship fund in his name. Or it could be dancing for him at Dance Marathon, sweat pouring from you as each step for twenty-four hours is silently dedicated to him. The point here is that you need to

construct grief into something beautiful. Because the grief is uniquely yours. Do something beautiful with your grief.

The next night at my parents' house, after Jude had gone back up to Tallahassee, I slept in my sister's bed and I wore one of my brother's shirts he had left at home. I hadn't known that friend of my brother's, that boy who had died, but I felt very sad. And I wanted to be close to my loved ones, close for comfort. I wanted the perfumed scent of my sister's thick hair, my brother's sweaty feet masked with boy cologne smell around me, like a shroud, like a roof of a church I could pray in, if I was the praying type. I needed them close. Because someone that someone loved had died. And I realized that maybe I didn't have to know the boy. Maybe it was enough that I recognized the pain, engaged with it before, identified with it now. This wasn't stealing; it was empathy.

Jude showed me a video on his phone. It was Halloween, and Uhre was dressed in a tutu and fairy wings and army fatigues. He was the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. Uhre was gay, and he had wanted to use those fairy wings in a costume, some way or other. Before this Halloween party and after this Halloween party, Uhre would disappear for a couple of days here and there. His family and friends were used to him falling off the map every now and then. He was private about his personal life. And although his closest friends and family knew that he was gay, he didn't talk about it very much. But while the Tallahassee police were investigating supposed pings from his cell phone in South Florida, his body was lying in an abandoned building where there had been a fire. There was a security video that no one had looked at until he was already dead. Uhre left a bar to pick up a food order, and he had walked down an alley toward the abandoned

building. A few minutes later, the security tape showed an older man taking the same path toward the abandoned building. Uhre's cause of death was a fall from the second story. His cell phone had been crushed, but he hadn't been robbed, so the police ruled out foul play, and they did not further the investigation.

In that Halloween video, in his fairy wings, his tutu, and his army fatigues, Uhre had turned to the camera and seemed to look through the camera with his huge smile. He said "watch this," and he dove through the open window into a kiddie pool. He slid on his stomach through the water, then jumped up and put his hands in the air. When he jumped through the window, he looked like he was flying.

## A LIFE YOU LOVE

Female beetles and ticks die after they lay eggs. So do cicadas, after laying about 400 eggs in 40 different nests. Male honeybees' genitals explode after mating with females. They die soon after that. Also about bees: they will die if they sting you when you get too close to the hive. Bald eagles, wolves, sand-hill cranes, barn owls, termites, prairie voles, French angelfish, swans, albatrosses, beavers, penguins: so many animals mate for life, I can't even count them. It's an intricate system of widows and widowers who seem to demurely decline remarriage if a partner is smashed by a car. Our definition and understanding of monogamous love can be applied to animals. Even if they mate for life to avoid inbreeding, marriage for them involves giving up something. And that is a concept that we humans still struggle with. Sometimes, I think it would be better to be an animal. Shingleback skink males court females for months at a time, offering gentle kiss-like licks before mating. When one of a pair of shingleback skinks dies, the surviving partner remains with the body for days at a time, sometimes wasting away. Elephants often exhibit symptoms of depression and stop eating when one of their herd dies. I saw a photograph of an elephant with her trunk wrapped around her dead friend's trunk, like a hug. A gesture of friendship. She stayed behind while the rest of the herd moved on and was alone because she had lost one she loved.

1.

Innocence does not find near so much protection as guilt.

— Francois de La Rochefoucauld

The boy I was dating when I was seventeen opened the sunroof and pointed at stars, told me he'd buy them for me. Not name them, not paint them, not see them in my eyes like a normal romantic cliché. He would buy them for me. We were on our way home from a party where his divorced parents brought replacement spouses and pretended they liked each other. They hugged and smoked cigarettes and let the teenagers drink beer because for a long time, being the cool parents had been their only ammo against their son's distaste for their marital history. I was driving because the boy was buzzing from beer and the liquid-crystal glow of video games. There was a tree ahead, in someone's yard by the lake. A massive oak with twisted, searching fingers of branches. There was no mirroring tree to meet it, so the oak formed half a tunnel, reaching for something inexplicable on the other side of the lake. And I'd always liked that tree. It curved in a backward C-shape out over the road. What was it reaching for?

We had just passed the quaint cottage with the uncomfortably futuristic, silver mailbox. The tree was just ahead, doing its backbend over the road. I could almost see the branches and leaves tingling with the effort of the stretch.

The headlights of the boy's Jeep were large and round and at the moment when we were almost parallel to the tree, something tiny fell from a branch, in front of the car. I thought it was a leaf at first, but at the last second, I realized and I turned the wheel to the left, too late to avoid the soft squish, not even big enough for a bump under the tire. A baby bird.

At first I didn't know this for sure. And had I been going slightly faster, it would have been in the car through the open sunroof and probably still alive. And, even at the

pace I was going, if I had been alone, if I didn't have this boy with an alcohol stomachache lying in the seat next to me, I would have pulled the car into the parking lot at the boat marina. I would have run back to the tree; I would have cried a silent, sloppy prayer for safe passage of the baby bird's soul, wherever it went.

But I had the boy in the car with me, and he had a stomachache. He didn't even realize what I did. He slipped his hand underneath the hem of my shirt and said *baby*. So I kept driving and I let him think that my tears were because I was overwhelmed and grateful at the prospect of owning a star. I didn't tell him about the baby bird because I didn't want him to have to share my sadness.

I went back the next day and confirmed it: there was a smear of blood and feathers, dwarfed by the large oil stains in the road. But it was there. Flies were investigating, but really what was there left to pick at? The delicate, air-filled bones had been powdered. What good are wings if they don't protect you? If someone takes them from you before you learn to use them?

The boy had laid his head in my lap once during a picnic and he looked through my eyes into the clouds behind my head and told me he promised he wouldn't be like his dad. He wouldn't cheat and leave, and I wouldn't be locking myself in the bathroom to cry like his mother did when his dad left. I wouldn't have to take refuge in my garden and grow forgiveness for my wandering husband. We would be together forever, he and I. But a year after the baby bird, he would call me and tell me he was leaving me because another girl had kissed him.

2.

Not all poisonous juices are burning or bitter, nor is everything which is burning and bitter poisonous.

— Claude Lévi-Strauss

I worked at a summer camp in 2012. I was 22 years old. We took the kids out on a nature walk, led by a scientist we knew as Miss Jacquie. Miss Jacquie had ink gardens covering the skin of both her arms, she had a pierced nose, and she wore hiking boots. The light hair on her legs looked like sparkles in the sun. Male and female counselors alike were smitten with her. She told us that some trees, like strangler figs, begin life when their seeds are eaten and pooped by birds near other trees. From the creamy excrement, seeds will develop vines that slither up the trunks of host trees to reach sunlight. They are often found in dark forests where they have to compete for light.

We got to a section of the trail where vines climbed the trunks of good Florida trees, the ones that bore oranges and grapefruit. Miss Jacquie told us those strangler figs were an invasive species and they didn't belong here. The strangler figs, Miss Jacquie explained, do what their name suggests: they strangle the host trees inside of them. The inside tree rots away, leaving the hollow shape of a tree. It's bizarre. It looks like a tree, but it is not a tree.

“Any vines you see that look like this,” she indicated a brown, curly branch, still skinny, “tear it off the tree. Go ahead, go crazy!”

The kids scattered, their feet cracking dried leaves into puzzle piece shapes. They were eager to rip and destroy and expel energy. They tore vines down, uncovered trees.

I turned to the other counselor in the five and six year old group.

“Kyle.”

“What?” He had just picked a tiny weed disguised as a flower and was already looking at me.

“Don’t you feel a little sad for them?” I held up a vine discarded on the ground.

“For who?” He wasn’t looking at the vine. He slipped the false flower into the front pocket of my backpack, where it would surely suffocate even faster, even though it was already dead.

“For those vines,” I felt like I was repeating myself.

“No, they’re hurting the trees.”

But they were only doing it so they could survive, so their species could survive.

“Still,” he shook his head. “I don’t feel bad.”

The vines looked like unraveling braids. They were only killing to survive. I believed it; I still believe it. I didn’t know how to feel about the whole situation. Miss Jacquie was handing out “Eco Warrior” badges to the kids. Kyle traded her another flower like mine for one of those badges. I chose not to say anything, but I looked back at the vines and felt sick to my stomach.

3.

I never knew you, yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you.

— Walt Whitman

In one of my recurring dreams, I am carrying a child. Sometimes in my arms, sometimes inside my body. The child is always a girl. I always name her Charlotte. Charlie for short. Sometimes the entire dream is me feeling the pressure in my lower belly, feeling flutters and ripples beneath my skin. Sometimes (and when I say sometimes, what I really mean is usually) the feeling, the child, the pressure will disappear. In all settings. In one version of the dream, I will find out that I will die if I keep letting the baby grow inside me. But I always keep her. Sometimes I'll be in a greenhouse and it'll start snowing. There will be a giant hole in the roof and the glass walls will fog and the room will begin to fill and freeze. My hands and feet will turn blue as I try to catch snow in the curves of my back and shield the child under the arch of my stomach. I dig into the hard cold earth and try to grow roots and try to be stronger.

4.

It's easier to bleed than sweat.

— Flannery O'Connor

The Aztecs believed, as I do, that a great, ongoing sacrifice sustains the universe. Everything lives because something else has died. Their gods had been severed and bloodied and buried underground. And from their ragged bodies, dirt was richer, seeds opened up, petals trembled, trees grew stronger to support nests to support birds. And the pain of those gods nourished all life.

It was important to make sacrifices to continue to nurture the universe. If the gods did it, then we humans should too. Types of sacrifice varied. Sometimes surplus

animals were sacrificed. Other times, humans were honored with the chance to help. One tribe I read about didn't discriminate; even small and beautiful creatures were considered. This particular tribe supposedly sacrificed butterflies and hummingbirds. Every little bit counted.

People tend to romanticize human sacrifice. Aztecs are barbarized for the beliefs that made their world spin. We have seen it in old movies. Tribes so ancient they cannot be named tearing through the jungles. They grab slight white blonde heroines and tie them with scratchy rope between trees. But the rugged white heroes in knee-high black boots and stiff khakis always rescue the sexy girls right before their life blood is spilled from their bird-like necks.

So where did that leave the tribes? Did their worlds end? Did they fall apart because they couldn't be sustained? Or when explorers came, did the sacrificers become the sacrificed?

5.

It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

—Leviticus 17, 11

I took my brother to the pet store just after I turned seventeen. I was already disenchanted with driving, despite only having had my license for a few months. It was supposed to be a simple enough trip: feeder fish for the albino frogs and a blue crayfish.

We were on the heavily shaded Tennessee Street when my brother decided to open the Chinese food style box that temporarily housed the crayfish.

“Uh. Sloane?” We were at a two-way stop sign. A tree, much like the one with the baby bird, curved out over the road, obscuring my view of oncoming traffic.

“Hmm?” I was trying to see the road beyond the tree.

He told me that the crayfish had gotten out of its box and had crawled under his seat.

“Dammit Jude!” I took my foot off the brake by accident as I strained to see the bright blue body moving on the car’s black interior.

Then I was hit on the driver’s side by a great boat of a car. Sliding sideways, I saw a deserted church parking lot on the corner and maneuvered my car to that point. The old woman navigating the boat was standing in the middle of the road, thinking herself the victim of a hit and run; she was screaming for help and waving her arms at other cars, pointing at me, as I drove two feet away, within walking distance. Really, no more than a stride away.

Realizing my intentions and her mistake, the old lady climbed back aboard her barge and joined me in the otherwise empty parking lot.

We exchanged information and I got a scolding (she thought that my brother was my boyfriend, despite our very clear five-year age gap). She then confided in me that she couldn’t see very well and she didn’t want the police called in case it was her fault.

“But it wasn’t your fault.” I held her license out patiently, waiting for her to see it and take it back.

I wasn’t thinking about any of this conversation the whole time I was having it. I was thinking about my brother. Thankfully, we had gotten hit on my side. I had bumped

my head on the steering wheel and would later find a faint, seatbelt-shaped bruise on my chest. But I almost wished I had sustained some injuries—a broken arm, a thin, trickling cut on my cheek, to prove to myself that I had been protecting (and would continue to protect) my brother.

7.

It was too easy to die for what was good or beautiful.

— Graham Greene

For twelve of the last fifteen years that my family has lived in the house they have now, my mom has eaten an apple on her way home from work each day, Monday through Friday. She times it so she finishes her last bite right as she's waiting for the mechanical gate to open. In front of the stone and stucco wall in the middle of the gates, there is a rosebush that has been clipped beyond recognition by members of the Homeowner's Association. This, not the garbage can or the compost pile, is where my mom throws her apple core each day. There is a pile of them rotting among the roots of the rosebush on any day of the year. Since I was nine years old, I have been hoping—for fifteen years—that even just one of the seeds would plant itself in the ground and grow an apple tree. I'd climb over the gate every couple of days in fourth grade to check for seedlings, progress of any kind. I was prepared to give up the sterile beauty of the rosebushes if it meant that an apple tree there would sustain and nourish others with its fruit. I was prepared to take care of it. But it never happened. Eventually, I began to consider the

possibility that there was a flock of good and reliable birds that would carry seeds somewhere else to create an orchard. I have dreamed about it.

7.

Sacrifice still exists everywhere, and everywhere the elect of each generation suffers for the salvation of the rest.

— Henri-Frédéric Amiel

My dad told me about the Sun Dance when I was little. He studied anthropology and his focus was Native American Studies. If I hadn't been born so soon, he probably would have gone on to get his doctorate and do ethnographic studies.

“Dads took care of their families,” he'd tell me, untying his shoes in the living room, exhausted after a long day of being an elementary school principal. “They took care of their families by causing themselves pain.”

“Do you do that?” I'd touch the paper cut on his finger or his shoulder that hurt him when he got home from work.

“Sometimes, I guess,” he'd smile.

He told me stories about how, during the Sun Dance, participants sometimes put hooks through their chests. He told me how they danced, barely touching the ground, almost suspended, till their skin tore. Delirious and throbbing, they believed they were absorbing the pain of their families, babies, friends.

I was enthralled and never scared by his stories. I wanted to do that for someone, I always thought. I still do. That was the first place I got the idea that pain was

transferrable, that if I hurt myself, someone else would be spared. I think it's worked before.

8.

“I am just going outside and I may be some time.”

— Lawrence Oates

My mom was diagnosed with blood cancer when I was seventeen years old. She was sequestered to the hospital for a month and was on liquid nutrition for almost three weeks. Of course she lost weight. She threw up a lot because of her medications. She developed sores in her throat as side effects, and it was difficult for her to swallow.

I was scared to touch her when I visited, scared that her bones would break if I hugged her. She made me think of the baby bird I had killed with the car just a few months before.

During this time, I went to work as a waitress at a restaurant owned by my dad's friends. I would stay after my shift and gorge myself on breadsticks, calzones, pepperonis. Then I would go home, turn on the shower and the bathroom fan, and force myself to throw up in the toilet.

Around that time, I read a book about a girl who hurt herself to save her friend's baby from dying. She believed if she consciously inflicted pain on herself, with smooth and sideways strokes of her razor, if she saw the blood bead on the cuts like gems on a necklace, she was taking pain away from others she loved. So if I was vomiting, the strength I flushed would be somehow returned to my mom. When I was finished, I felt

weak. My stomach gargled with emptiness; I'd repeat my process till I could see the yellow bile floating in the toilet water. I felt like there was nothing left. My throat was raw from the acidic taste and from the scratches of the plastic spoon I used to gag myself. I threw up till my legs would shake. Till my head felt empty; I was one of those hollow strangler figs, killing the nutrition inside me.

A couple weeks after the vomiting started, my mother was taken off liquid nutrition, and she ate a cup of Jell-O. The mouth sores began to subside. I kept throwing up for a year, just to build up some pain for myself and some strength for my mom.

It sounds repulsive now, but I truly did believe that because I emulated my mother's pain, because I purposely did things that hurt me, that she was being healed.

9.

The most sublime act is to set another before you.

— William Blake

My siblings and I have had an unspoken agreement all our lives that we won't tell on each other. It's been broken a few times. The idea is that, no matter how bad it gets, the person who gets caught takes the blame. When I was in middle school, one of us (I can't remember who) took a beer from the fridge because we were curious about the taste of the beverage our dad sipped each night before he fell asleep on the couch. No one liked the taste, of course, so it was thrown in the outside garbage can. It spilled sticky and yeasty on the garage floor. The smell was undeniable. But we all denied it, Jesse, Jude, and I. Jesse was the most truthful, so she confessed, crying, and leaving out the

part that she was not the only one who took bitter sips from the cold can. My dad took away her beloved Bionicle figurines and her Yu-Gi-Oh cards for a week.

10.

How I want our love to know  
That inside me, she'll always grow.  
In all colors and sizes  
You will always remain.

—Beach House, “Turtle Island” lyrics

Charlie Chaplin’s first child, Norman Spencer Chaplin (“The Little Mouse”) lived for only three days. Charlie had gotten Mildred Harris pregnant when she was about 16, only a child herself. After the baby died, there was nothing left for them, their love was hollow and it consumed them into nothing. They divorced. Their marriage was called a sham from the start.

“The Little Mouse,” a boy, three days old, was buried in a tiny grave in Inglewood Park Cemetery in Los Angeles. He rests under the shade of pepper trees by a little pool.

Two years after The Little Mouse died, *The Kid* was released. This was Charlie’s best movie; it was said to have been inspired by The Little Mouse. Charlie became deeply attached to Jackie Coogan, who played The Kid. He was a few years older, but he could have been that lost son, in a way.

The part where the policemen take The Kid away is unbearable. You can almost see Charlie choking against their locked, blocking arms. He probably went home with bruises on his ribs from struggling so hard. It seems too real.

Charlie never developed close relationships with any of his other eleven children. They were well-taken-care of, but he was cold and distant. People say he was a piece of shit dad, but I think it's more complicated than that. When he lost The Little Mouse, he was he was irrevocably changed, scarred by the sensation of holding a dead child, of burying someone almost small enough to fit in a shoe box. I think that because we sometimes shut down when we lose, Charlie was scared the other children would be lost too.

So rather than letting little trembling bodies crawl shaking with nightmares into his bed, rather than baking cakes in the shapes of shoes, rather than waddling as a group over the slick tile floors, Charlie was alone most of the time, with no one to kiss good night but the people in his film strips.

11.

Love is my religion  
and I could die for that.  
I could die for you.

— John Keats

In the last five years, I believe I've had miscarriages on a few different occasions. This is speculation based on missed periods and odd painful bleedings. Women

experience early miscarriages quite often; some of them don't realize it because it happens close to their periods.

One of them I know was a miscarriage for sure.

Recently, I've been to the doctor and found out that I have a slow-growing, but currently harmless patch of cells on my cervix. A little growth that must be monitored. I don't know if that has anything to do with my womb's apparent inability to hold life. I don't know if I have an oddly shaped uterus. Or if my genes are somehow trying to remedy generations of cancer by ending the bloodline.

Whatever the case, I know this for sure, and it's something I won't forget: Last fall, Kyle (the counselor I met among the strangler figs at summer camp) and I were together. We loved each other, even when it was difficult and it didn't make sense.

One night, we were at my apartment and we were drunk and I told him about the dream I kept having, the one where the baby disappeared. He decided to try to get me pregnant. In hindsight, I realize this was not a good idea. Kyle was unemployed, still in school, and he was in the process of being charged with a DUI (an example of a time when our relationship was difficult and it didn't make sense).

But I had a steady job and good medical insurance. So, maybe, I thought. We might have been able to do it. I know that I could have, even if Kyle and I didn't decide to be together.

We had sex three times that night and once the next morning. And each time, I felt his release inside me. I squeezed my legs together from my perch atop him, as if I could hold every drop he gave me. I wanted him to fill me up. I later thought of

something I'd read in a book about a paper cup trying to contain an ocean. I wanted to be that paper cup, but stronger. I wanted him to be that ocean and give me all of the life he was hiding beneath his surface.

Our attempt to conceive was radically different from any of the other times we'd had sex. There was an uncertain and self-conscious tenderness with which Kyle touched me. He kissed me on the corners of my mouth, the way I liked to be kissed. He touched me with his fingertips and not his scratching nails. We were sweet with each other. Afterwards, we laid with his head resting on my chest. I rocked him and hummed, practicing for the baby we were trying to make.

One of the times was 11:11 that night and I closed my eyes and wished for a baby. *Charlotte, Charlotte, Charlotte...* I said her name (because I knew it would have to be a she) over again in my head, wove it into a quilt of wish words, a prayer blanket to cover her with. I built her name into an adobe house, grew it from a garden, arranged it in a better, stronger nest not resting in a tree over a road.

But still, she plummeted.

Kyle was afraid the next day and he asked me to take the morning-after pill and I lied to him. I told him I did, but I didn't. Even when I wasn't drunk. Maybe it was still unreasonable, but I still wanted a daughter. I was lonely in a way I'd never been before. I needed a tiny hand to hold, a little body who was afraid of the dark and wanted to fall asleep listening to my stories and snuggling in my bed. In all of my accomplishments so far, there had been nothing tangible, nothing that would hold my index finger with chubby, needy fists. When I was at work, I sat through meetings with other middle

school teachers, listening to procedures about lockdowns. *If someone gets on campus with a gun, you make sure that your students are locked safe in the closet. Slide the key under the door. Tell them to hide in corners away from the closet door. Stand in front of the closet door and wait.* These meetings exhilarated me instead of scaring me. I never wanted our school to be attacked, but hearing these awful scenarios did not make me want to save myself. It made me proud to think of chances I could get hurt protecting someone else. That's why I needed a baby. I needed a living thing to care for constantly. If Kyle didn't want that, I would take care of her myself.

I missed my period, which overjoyed me. I held my hand on my lower stomach while my seventh grade students wrote in their journals. I didn't need to think of names (Charlotte).

I researched OB&GYN specialists. I deleted the resignation letter I'd already prepared to take the next year off teaching; I would have needed to keep my job and health insurance. I readied myself to drop out of graduate school. I wrote poems in my journal about all the things I'd give up for my baby girl (still, I was sure it was a girl). But it wouldn't be giving up if I got something far, far better, would it? I dreamed of my belly swelling out in front of me, of myself smiling at strangers and telling them when I was due: *towards the end of July, maybe around the 22<sup>nd</sup> or the 23<sup>rd</sup>.* Of course that was dream-me talking. In real life, I just knew it would have been sometime in July that she would have been born.

But a few weeks later, I woke up bleeding. The sheets had to be thrown out. I bled. And then it stopped. My body had drained itself of what I'm sure had been Charlotte.

She fell out of the tree and was smashed.

12.

It was for this world that Christ had died: the more evil you saw and heard about you, the greater the glory lay around the death.

— Graham Greene

When I drive at night now, I avoid paths ceilinged by trees. I'm also sensitive about frogs. There's a moment when you see them illuminated in the headlights, still in the road, thinking they've won, they're safe. Then your body, your car, becomes a weapon and you run them over. And you have to recognize and mourn the moment that you've hit them because your car won't even let you feel it. I swerve trying to avoid them; my car is a bead woven through the yellow ribbon down the middle of the road. I am determined not to kill anything else that doesn't have to die.

I feel purposeful when I go to my parents' house and take care of my brother's fish while he's away at college. Like many men I know, my brother loves the novelty of living things. He is fascinated by girls in slick, silvery dresses sequined like fish scales on the pets he's left behind. But he loses interest very quickly. I've made it one of my purposes to keep his fish alive, to care for them. Right now, he has a gar. I've kept it

alive long enough for it to get its teeth. The arowana, the catfish, the snook, the mudfish have all died under my care. But the long, skinny gar remains.

I thought I was doing something right, but my brother, between fraternity events, told me on the phone: “You’d have to try really hard to kill it. That thing could live in a sewer.”

But still, I go to the pet store, I get feeder fish for the gar to eat, I hold the plastic bag full of air and water. I block the bag with my hand on the drive home so it won’t slip from the seat. I block it the way my mom did to me when I first started sitting in the passenger seat when I was young and we would stop short.

But we hit some bumps on the way home and the fish nervously go to the bathroom in the bag. They eat their own shit: long, light brown, stringy pieces of it. I hold the bag to my chest and walk up to the house and I can feel their quivering bodies. Do they even have hearts big enough to me to feel when they beat? Is that their collective heartbeat or mine? I walk up to the house, where the feeders will acclimate in the tank, where I will release them and one will hover at the top of the tank by the net, knowing what’s coming, that I’ve raised them for slaughter. That I’m their mother for this moment and I’ve held their bag the way you hold someone you love, tenderly and in the crook of your arm. And in the next moment, I’ve sacrificed them to take care of something else. Sacrifice for survival, for furthering other life.

## LIKE MAKING A WISH AND TELLING SOMEONE

Nothing good can grow here. I realize it, but I don't say it out loud. Kyle and I are planting wildflowers and beets and sunflowers and we even try black-eyed Susans, hoping they'll work. We try the black-eyed Susans because Kyle's dad told us they were easy to grow, and we want to believe him.

There used to be a house here, exactly where we are standing. A concrete structure, close to the ground, as if it were trying to disappear into the earth. I don't even know if they bothered painting it. A halfway house—halfway between prison and life. Maybe that's why the drab concrete grey walls, to help with the transition process. The residents of that house were transient, ragged men drinking coffee so they wouldn't drink something worse and crumbling women who rested skinny against porch pillars breathing cigarettes. But then one of the languishing hands didn't put out a cigarette and flames ate the house. There's a pond over to the right, fenced in with spongy ground and a few cows. I don't know who the cows belong to. On the other side of the cows, there's a church made with rough white boards of different sizes. Like a kid's shoebox project with houses and buildings too small for even the mice that I imagined living in them. Or the tiny trouble dolls I put inside my tiny houses. Behind where the house was, there is a graveyard that is separated from the church by that pasture.

The house burned down years ago, when I was 11 or 12. Enough time has passed so there are no marks where the foundation used to be. Someone came and removed the scarred pieces of foundation, and patches of newer grass hide the fact that there was ever a house there at all. No record of the house ever having existed.

Kyle and I are standing where the back of the house was. Where perhaps a bedroom was, windows facing out toward the graveyard. There is a big tree that I would have looked at if this had been my room, so I didn't have to look at the gravestones and think about the dead all the time. We are holding a pack of seeds each.

It's like present-day argues with your memory and present-day always wins out. Because it's stronger. The nothingness wipes out the substance of what was actually there. It's like the dream I sometimes have, where I'm excited and I am taking someone to a place I think is great. A restaurant, I think, with the best chiles rellenos. Or maybe a house with a window in an interesting shape, like a butterfly. We drive a far distance, down a long road together. Usually the road is surrounded by auto parts stores and bail bond/check cashing places. When we finally arrive where it is we are trying to go, it's not even there. So I guess we never arrive.

It's like falling from the monkey bars onto your back and trying to catch your breath, your hands still gripping the air that was the metal bar seconds before. It's like crying when your friends jump from behind a couch and put a cake in your face, urging you to blow out the candles when you can see just beyond them the quiet night you were intending to have.

That feeling of surprise, and more specifically, surprise that something you remember so clearly is gone.

When I was a child, I spent evenings collecting entire handfuls of strange objects I found in our yard. These objects were pink and petal-shaped, or wing-shaped if you read as many fairytales as I did back then. I was concerned about why so many fairies

were losing their wings. I would collect the tiny things and pile them in the shade of a mushroom or on top of a weird rock I'd found. I would say little spells and poems I'd made up, and I'd write stories about the all the one-winged fairies in our woods getting their wings back. In my stories, they'd thank me by inviting me into the trees that they'd light up for me like Christmas lights. They'd show me their glittering cities in the holes of the old trees. When I was a little bit older, my mom told me that they were seeds. She saw me carefully putting them in my pockets and paying attention to the trail they made around the backyard, and she told me to leave them be; they were seeds and they could only plant themselves to grow if I left them on the ground. That's why they had the wing shape because they needed to be able to take flight to get to the fertile soil where they would grow. I know that my mom was trying to help me, but I felt crushed knowing the truth. Something I had loved was gone; I still wanted to look at those seeds and see fairy wings. But when she said that, I started to see the seeds. I felt the same as I felt the time that my sister and I picked flowers for our aunt. When I presented her with a bouquet, my hands still smudged with dirt, she tossed them rustling onto the back porch table.

“These are just a bunch of weeds,” she said.

The lot Kyle and I stand on belongs to no one who cares enough to visit; it has been abandoned and the grass keeps growing and hiding the signs that warn trespassers that trespassing is a violation punishable by the law at the suggestion of that elusive owner. And for a long time, on trips from college to my childhood house to visit my parents, I've wanted to do something for that lot. I mentioned to Kyle that I wanted to

make it more beautiful when we were on the way home from work. We were both staying with our parents while we worked at summer camp.

Before the garden, we are squatting on the smooth and sometimes sticky floor of/at Walmart. We are in front of the shelf holding the seeds.

“We’re looking for hearty plants, like beets,” Kyle takes three packets of beet seeds. “Maybe we could grow some banana peppers eventually. I’m not sure.” Kyle, being three years younger than me, is always looking for ways to show his maturity. We love it when he can teach me things because it makes me forget how old I am.

“I want sunflowers.” I remember thinking about the photograph my mother took of my siblings and me standing beside a sunflower taller than all of us. When we were kids. “Sunflowers taller than you, Kyle.” I touch the top of his head.

“Sunflowers are difficult. I don’t think you’ll be able to do them without me.”

But I don’t want beets. I want something beautiful to take care of. Kyle is going back to college in two weeks, and I will be left in Orlando and Saint Cloud, working my first adult job. I want a lovely enough reason for him to come home. Vases with fresh-clipped blooms that still followed the sun out the window from their place on the table while I cooked dinner and pretended that my apartment I’d live in that fall was our apartment.

We compromise with wildflowers. Kyle still wants the beets, so we grab those and banana peppers all the kinds of flowers I want.

Kyle's dad once accidentally spilled a packet of black-eyed Susans on his way out to the garden and they accidentally bloomed. He told us, or maybe Kyle did, one night while we were drinking beers and watching *North by Northwest*.

"That's how Mom and I had Kyle too," his dad laughed loud like he's in a bar. His hands moved like they were doing magic tricks. "Whoops, a spill! Then something grew."

Our seeds look like some kind of seasoning for steaks or salads. They smell like when I pressed my nose to the grass as a kid, pretending to be a cow, taking bitter pieces in my mouth, dirt at the corners.

When we decide to plant flowers, we have just spent a week playing house; I am housesitting while my family was away in the mountains. My dad strictly forbids me from dating Kyle after they check my phone records. I am 22, but I am home the summer after graduating college, still on my parents' phone bill and insurance. Still very much a child in many ways. My dad reminds me of this often. He doesn't want me with Kyle because of the boy's reputation.

Kyle had dated most of my sister's friends when they were in high school. He had fucked a girl named Dixie in her truck in the parking lot before class; he'd introduced himself to her parents as a perfect Southern gentleman, an old money type. He had listened to the *Glee* soundtrack over and over in Yearbook class just to get a kiss from a shy and good girl named Lexie. And now he is wearing his "I Love Planet Earth" socks and reading *Game of Thrones* each day at lunch because he senses how nerdy I am. I think I know it is partially an act, but I can't help but feel that this bookish side of him is

his most vulnerable, true self. My father is also concerned about the DUI that Kyle had gotten earlier in the summer when he was driving back from a party in Gainesville.

When Kyle tells his parents he likes me, his mother makes me spaghetti and hugs me and his dad talks to me about old Cary Grant movies. My parents tell me that he will never be welcome in their home, and I will not be either if I continue seeing him. My father tells the neighbor, a police officer who drinks and keeps guns in his home, to check on the house while my family is away in the mountains. I make Kyle lie down in the back seat, covered by our camp backpacks, until we pull in the garage each day after work. I close the blinds and worry about our shadows and silhouettes in the house.

We spend that week smoking cigarettes on the back porch, drinking whiskey, playing Risk, throwing each other in the pool, and urgently tearing off our chlorine-saturated clothes in the doorway into the house. We leave wet puddles in the shapes of our bodies on the tile floor. He rips off my favorite purple bra and guts it of hooks and wires the way someone might do with a fish and its bones.

I burn the jasmine rice and curry chicken I try to make him, so we work out instead of dinner, savoring the sweat that comes out of our pores.

One night that week, we drive up and down OBT, hoping for at least one prostitute sighting. When we fail, we succumb to the dirty yellow light coming from a Mexican restaurant. Entering the place immediately limpens my hair with grease.

“I hope this place has roaches, or at least mice,” I joke, and Kyle nods encouragingly.

“That would make it more authentic,” he adds. “Also, the cook should be really hairy, with a badly-placed tattoo, like a crooked one on the bicep.”

“The name of a girl he’s not with anymore or the footprints of his infant child or something. But nobody cares how hairy he is because the food is so good.”

Kyle can’t keep it up any longer. He has his fist to his mouth and he is laughing and stepping on my foot with one of his red Vans, the ones with holes by the pinky toes.

“I like you, faggot,” is all he says.

We eat most of my steak and beans and fried eggs and only a little bit of what he orders, out of Styrofoam boxes with greasy wax paper and plastic forks. Our feet slip on the slick floor and when we get up to refill our soda cups, my skin sticks to the plastic chair.

On the way home, he reads to me from *Danny and the Dinosaur*, a childhood book he loved and I’ve found at Barnes & Noble. He bites my neck as hard as he can. This odd combination of sweet companionship and harsh consumption of each other is what sustains us. My bruises and scrapes will have days to heal before my family will be home. My skin will be deceptively smooth by then.

We have sex in a half-finished neighborhood, which has come to be a tradition by that point. Half-finished or destroyed places were the only places we can exist together because our relationship makes no sense in the normal world. A middle school teacher and a sophomore in college, self-described “frat star.” From the beginning, when we had to hide our shaky relationship from our boss and the girl he was fucking and the guy I was dating. My father warned me that I could jeopardize my job if my principal found

out that I was involved with a college student. There was an air of forbidden to our relationship that made us feel closer, and we liked it somewhat. And when it was out in the open, just like in movies, things would start to fizzle, cliché, but true. It was unacceptable in conventional places.

And up to this point, it has been easy. Easy for me to point out hot girls and say vulgar things about what we could do with them sexually because I could see how wrapped up in me Kyle was. He didn't want anyone else. But I can feel things changing as we get closer to him going back to Gainesville. He is restless and excited and I am part of the home that has been keeping him away from all that. He gives me vague messages that it might be almost over, like: "Maybe you can text me sometime this year and tell me how my brother is doing in your class." Things like that let me know that it might be over when he leaves. Things like that point out how much older I am.

But the week he stays with me, we can pretend. So we plant flowers. An illegal garden for me to take care of in secret. I can drive there at night, traipse past the "No Trespassing" signs like one of the twelve princesses dancing through an enchanted forest. Covering the memory of the ashes of the burned down house. Flowers for people visiting the graveyard who are sick of the cloth blooms that fade slowly and artificially with the sun. Both an answer to my question and a solution to other people's problems.

We chose this place because earlier this summer, we first had sex in a half-finished house in a bankrupt neighborhood. Places like that hold magic for us. They are places where we find and create beauty in places other people have forgotten. We once had sex in another abandoned house, this one only half-burned. Kyle threw out the

costume jewelry so he could give me a wooden box with dark green flowers painted on the top. I felt guilty and we took the box back to the house and I said a secret prayer to apologize to the house for disturbing it.

It's like we moved in stages. First something not finished being built, then something half-burned. It was like we were trying to breathe life into dusty old sad places. We never thought about beds or bedrooms when we had sex.

One night during our secret week, we park in the graveyard and it's about two weeks before Kyle has to go back to Gainesville. We have come from the flea market, where we eat chili cheese dogs and buy stale-smelling ties for Kyle and a ring with a luchador mask on it for me. We make mental lists of things no one should buy at flea markets or garage sales:

"Underwear," I offer him a ripped open plastic pack containing white briefs. The Fruit of the Loom model is a lot more well-endowed and less saggy than any of the flea market patrons who might pick them up. Kyle grabs onto the thong beneath my maxi dress and snaps it in response.

"That's a given." His unimpressed voice tells me that my answer isn't creative enough. "Shampoo, sunscreen, vaginal itch cream. Three in a row. Boom." Boom is something boys his age liked to say in high school, and I have never understood it.

"Something wrapped in a napkin... A case for a kid's retainer, but it's filled with a coin collection. Still smells like spit though." As soon as I say it, I feel sad. Why am I making fun of some kid's hiding spot for his or her most valuable treasures? What makes me even sadder is the fact that these treasures ended up here for someone to buy for far

less than their emotional worth. I hold the red retainer gently in the palm of my hand, no longer disgusted by the saliva smell. I am ready to buy it, to try to do what the girl in the French movie would and return it to its owner, setting off on a spree of good deeds. But Kyle was laughing at my regretted joke and he was ready to move on.

“Okay, you win,” he smiles. “Let me just buy you this Nascar bikini and we’ll be on our way.” He laughs again and kisses my hand. He is happy. I can feel it now; being around me makes him feel confident, strong, like he has a purpose in making someone’s life better. He doesn’t flinch anymore when I touch his hand in public, or when he has to climb into the passenger seat of my car. It’s like in my presence he forgets his DUI and his small-town reputation for fucking girls over.

While we drive away from the flea market, my stomach starts to feel funny. I know that chili dog is going to give me diarrhea. I am both embarrassed and happy that I have to find a way to hide it from Kyle. We are going to the same house. Like we are married. But secretly married. Because he has to hop the fence and be let in at the back door, his cigarette kiss meeting mine, since my cop neighbor is watching the house.

“Let’s plant flowers now,” Kyle jerks the steering wheel in the direction of our vacant lot on Orange Avenue. I swat his hand away because we cut a car off. But still, I drive where he wants to go. He grabs the seeds from the center console and slides them between my legs. My dress is tucked up and the paper packets stick to my legs with sweat.

I smile at the joke I could have made about Kyle's seeds being between my legs, so close to where they need to be. But I don't want him to know that I feel that way, that I wanted that. Even if it sounds like a joke.

Despite the fact that no one for ten years has wanted the lot where the house burned down, each corner of the land is marked by a "No Trespassing" sign, red letters rusted orange by the sun. And despite the very Biblical tone of those warnings, we proceed. Does that mean we are sinners? It does feel like holy land when we step on it. So, forgive us, I think, because we are going to trespass.

Because of the signs, Kyle tells me to look for cars that look like police cars. We stand side by side, and I hold the shovel that he says we don't need. I think about that painting of the solemn farmers and pretend I'm Kyle's wife.

Kyle tears the paper packet open with his teeth and sprinkles the wildflower seeds ceremoniously, like spreading ashes of a loved one over a favorite ocean or lake, or off the side of a mountain with an admired view. He opens his palm slowly and lets the wind carry and plant them, like we talked about. The right way. I take a handful and breathe them into the air, like he-loves-me, he-loves-me-not flower petals, like dandelion pieces, like confetti at a wedding. I spin in circles and imagine the flowers growing in a fairy ring around me, protecting me from harm. The same way I thought that those pink, tear-drop shaped seeds were fairy wings as a kid. I thought that if I collected enough of them, set them in piles like offerings in dusty corners of the back porch, that I would be rewarded for my kindness, carried away and given wings of my own.

He stands behind me, his fingers twirling through my hair ready to pull at any moment, my mouth is in a perpetual circle, breath just behind my lips, ready to scatter the seeds, my eyes looking for a good place to do so. Planting the flowers: it happens so quick that I have to check my seed packets to make sure I haven't imagined it. It is best to pretend like we don't care if our seeds grow or blow away, except I keep looking back to see, like making a wish and telling someone. I have this uneasy feeling in my stomach that this won't work. I can't explain it, but it's there.

Later, Kyle reminds me that it is my job to care for the garden while he is away. There's only so much one can do while the seeds are in the ground. I can press my ear to the ground and pretend that plants have heartbeats, pretend that I can hear them. Feeling encouraged at this imaginary sound, I can read poems or sing songs, I can caress the spots where I believe seeds have been planted. I can water the ground. I can breathe and hope the carbon dioxide in my breath helps. I know none of that is scientifically sound. But in my world of trying to grow things, trying to give life, I want to do all I can. I can chase the birds away when they swoop down looking for tasty morsels. Although, I shouldn't, Kyle says. Sometimes bird shit can help plant things too. But usually it's just seeds from fruits they've eaten that get planted by the shit.

I can do all these things, hoping, but none of this will really work. Because it's not up to me until I see the sprouts peeking above the crust of earth, like a butter knife smoothly cutting through a hardened heel of bread. That's when I can be responsible for our garden, when it chooses to make some sort of appearance. Until our garden appears,

all I can do is come visit every day, especially after Kyle leaves, waiting to see some kind of change. Nothing happens at first.

But one day, soon after he's gone, I pass by the lot and see a change I didn't anticipate. The overgrown grass that has allowed us to classify this as abandoned, and therefore, a place for us, has been mowed to a springy buzz cut. Closely shaven, like a little boy's head in summer. Who cuts the grass here? Perhaps I've never noticed anyone cutting the grass because for so long, I've claimed this seemingly unclaimed land as mine. I've wanted it to be mine, I've wanted to grow beautiful things here, so no one else can possibly want it. In this moment, I refuse to accept any alternative. No one wanted this lot for ten years.

In a panic, I park and I look at the spot where I know the flowers were planted and I see nothing. I call Kyle because I fear that our garden means our relationship. One of our intimate ties, severed.

What's worse? The flowers having grown and been cut down, or the failure of the flowers to grow at all? I know without thinking that it's the second. This is because I've driven by here every single day and I haven't seen any kind of growth. If they had grown, even a little, they would have seen some sort of life. But they didn't.

I tell Kyle that I've failed as a gardener. *What's wrong with this land? Why won't things grow here?* He laughs and isn't concerned, and next time he's home to visit, he gives me a pepper plant housed in a glass goldfish bowl. He half buries a purple crystal geode, a seashell, an arrowhead. Treasures for me to excavate, or talismans to protect the Thai pepper plant against my not-green thumb. I leave the trinkets in the dirt

of the bowl. The plant sits on the back porch of my apartment, on a black table I've found in a dumpster, and it grows. If I can cultivate life in a glass bowl, why can't I in the ground? The Thai peppers flower and grow and each night, I sit on the porch with a beer. And I tell the Thai pepper plant my stories. I tell it about my student whose little brother is sick, about the PE teacher who I have a crush on despite Kyle, about the days I spend with my students under the Spanish moss that drapes the branches of the massive oaks outside my classroom. I talk to the pepper plant about living with my sister, how I worry when she drinks with her friends and then closes herself away in her room some nights. About the dreams I have about my brother disappearing, not getting hurt or being taken, but disappearing from parties, from rooms clotted with fraternity brothers and skinny, blonde girls. Just disappearing. The pepper plant is so full of my stories that it can't die, I assume. I think about the story I once heard, about how if you climb a mountain in China and tell your secret into the hole of a tree and cover it with dirt, the tree will keep your secret forever. It will live with your secret.

I will think more about the way things grow, about secret-keeping trees, on New Year's when Kyle gets really drunk at a party he won't want me at. He'll have talked at length of mythical parties with the boys friends of his youth, no girls allowed. Mudding out at Suburban and smoking cigars with whiskey. He'll want me at home where it's safe; I wouldn't get along with his friends. If he can slip away, we can still meet up at midnight for that first kiss of the new year. We will fight about the girls in wisps of dresses that he's had sex with in the past, the girls who all happen to be at the party he was very vocal about not wanting me to go to. I won't be mad at the girls. I'll mostly

feel sorry for them. I'll want to take them home and undress them and give them warmer clothes. Warn them against what they've already done.

I will win the argument about the party when I give him a blow job behind the dumpster at CVS when we go to visit his grandparents. His family will wait in the car ten feet away while we go to throw away the trash and when I make his legs shake and his fists clench and his breath heavy, he'll acquiesce. *Okay, we'll go to the party together.* I will go with him to this party, dressed in a sweater and Vans for warmth and not for male attention. I will drive like a chauffeur because Kyle will be drunk already and he'll want to lay down in the backseat, looking at the stars through the smudged sunroof. He'll smoke cigarettes that will leave smelly crumbling ash on the carefully vacuumed seats of my car. When we get to the house in the bowels of Saint Cloud, he won't hold my hand, won't introduce me as his girlfriend the way he does with his family. I will be mad at Kyle because his hand will fit so comfortably in the curve of a girl named Beth's waist, and he will say something that makes her cover her mouth and laugh. His hand will hold onto hers in their post-beer-pong high five, thumb caressing knuckle. And I will feel humiliated because he'll do all of this in front of me, and it will make me realize that other things happen when I'm not around. So I'll climb off the pile of musty laundry that's the only place I've found to sit, and I'll leave the party without a word of goodbye or thanks to the host of this party, some guy who is slurring words to a girl into a plastic cup like a kid's soup can phone. I'll want to pour my whiskey over the scrawny flower beds, but the flowers won't deserve the cheap whiskey in my cup, so I'll dump the bitter liquid on the first car I find, and I'll put the Styrofoam cup in the door

handle. Kyle will step out in front of my car when I try to leave. I'll see his silhouette outlined by my headlights. And what will scare me is that I'll imagine myself hitting him with my car. In the back of my mind, or maybe the primal innermost part, the part that tells me how to survive, will tell me that he isn't good for me and he needs to go. He will get in the car with me and he will try to be passionate. He'll grab my face and kiss me sloppily. When my lips don't warm to his, when my body doesn't melt to his, he will start in on my neck, biting it so hard that my skin will make a tearing noise and I'll bleed. We pull into the church parking lot. The church by the lot where we planted our flowers a few months before, the church by the lot and the graveyard. An old church—it's the one that black people went to when Saint Cloud was still split into two towns based on color. As recently as when my mother was a child. The church is whitewashed clapboards and creaky steps. It's small, looks about the size of a walk-in closet or a kitchen. On the large plot of land, it looks even smaller. A pasture, a graveyard, the lot where the halfway house burned down. And I'll pull over the car at the church beside the graveyard because I can't take him touching me for a second more, even though we will be two minutes from his house. I'll get out, hoping that the cold air and a cigarette will calm him down and sober him up.

I will sit on the hard ground of the churchyard to wait for him, and I'll try to look at the fireworks, distant on the shore of the lake, about a mile away. But he will circle me, make me feel preylike. He will see an invitation and he'll press my back to the ground, and he'll try to unbutton my pants. When I push him off me, he'll tell me not to be so tight and he'll reach between my legs, pawing at me, his clumsy fingers thick with

drink. His other hand will hold my jaw, push the back of my head into the cold dirt. It will be like one of those dreams where any sound I make is minimized and swallowed by darkness. Even if I scream, no one will hear me.

I'm not religious; I'm spiritual. I believe in God when I'm surfing or hiking or even pulling weeds from the cracks in the driveway. I don't go to church. I don't read the Bible before I go to sleep; I'm not able to recite verses. I don't hold hands and pray at dinner tables or over sick friends. I'm not a Sunday school teacher or a strong and respected woman of faith. I'm not religious, but somehow what we're about to do seems disrespectful. I can't have sex in or even outside a church. It's wrong. And the clear right choice here will be to go get back in the car and get Kyle home to bed. But what I'll do instead is push Kyle off of me and I'll get up and run through the pasture, the cool wet long grass slapping against my legs, turning the dirt on my pants to mud. I'll run over the ground where our flowers should have grown. My arms will sling out by my sides, blood running to my chilled fingers. My arms: I'll pretend they are wings. Daphne ran away and turned herself into a tree to get away from Apollo. She offered him stiff limbs and hard flesh that would never respond to his touch, and Apollo honored her body anyway. But my limbs are not branches. I cannot make them branches, even if I won't want to have sex with Kyle. All I will do is run to the graveyard and hide behind a large headstone that says Knoebel. I will close my eyes and feel his hands hug my waist and lift me from the ground like I weigh nothing. I have no roots like Daphne did. Kyle will finish unbuttoning my pants and his, he'll pull them to around our thighs. He will drape me over the gravestone and he'll hold me there by pressing his knees into the back of my

legs. The cold air and his warm hands will sting my bottom. He will pull my underwear aside the way they do in porn movies and he will ram himself inside of me before I will get a chance to say a word. Any words I say afterward will be ignored. He won't even check to see if I'm wet. It will take him several thrusts to get all the way inside me because I won't be wet. I will brace myself against the stone and push against his primal contact, arching my back and trying to slide out from underneath his body, but he will grab my waist and hold me there, shoving into me. My hips will scrape and underneath those scrapes, I'll feel bruises forming too. Knoebel's gravestone will rock with the motion of my body slamming into it, and I'll be both frightened and saddened by the movement. I always thought that gravestones were heavy, permanent. I don't know why, but I thought that they were buried beneath the earth, just enough to stay, like a beach umbrella when it's properly dug in the sand. But there we are, disrespect for the dead nearly toppling and cracking the only earthly reminder that someone named Knoebel rests beneath this ground.

Being forgotten about after burial was a big fear during the Victorian age. In the time of Edgar Allen Poe stories, the superstitious and the fearful designed contraptions that allowed a bell on a string to be hoisted above a grave. The end of the string was closed in the casket so if a person was buried alive, they could ring for help. Above almost anything else, people were afraid of being buried alive and forgotten about. I will remember worrying that Knoebel will feel that he is forgotten if his gravestone above him is destroyed.

I will wish the earth would just open up and swallow us both and we'd be in hell where we belong: for fighting and having sex in graveyards, for smoking cigarettes, for not being able to take care of living things, even flowers, for drinking, for wanting to consume each other, for getting further and further away from the pure and perfect bodies each of our mothers made for us.

Kyle will grunt and shake and pull out of me. In the dark, I won't be able to see where the salty white liquid that streams out from him has gone, but I know that it's on the ground, on the holy sad ground. This is when I stop blaming him for what has happened because I'll know he's very drunk. So I start blaming myself. In my head, I say "You dirty whore, you made him do that. You wanted that, didn't you?" *You wanted that.* I say it about seventeen times in my head on the way to Kyle's house. And then I replace it with the gentler "Yes, I am in control." And I chant it silently. And by the time he stumbles up his driveway, I believe it. When I get home, I'll sit in my own driveway and say it out loud a few more times to make sure I really believe it. I will rewrite what happened, making myself the villain of my memory. I'll override my brain's distress call, ignore the pain at my hips and between my legs. Hobble through the silent house, wash my sore body, wrap my body in blankets and sleep.

I will consider going back to Knoebel's grave the next day to apologize, but I decide against it. I want to leave a gift, a peace offering of sorts. I have nothing to give. A flower, a real flower, not a cloth cemetery one, would be nice, but I don't have one. And our flowers didn't grow. I don't want to buy flowers, remove them from the plastic they come wrapped in, flowers dead long enough to have been transported in refrigerated

trucks to where they are sold. I want to pluck a flowers straight from the earth. Newly dead. Maybe the dead won't recognize its deadness. The flower won't know it's dead yet, maybe.

Our flowers didn't grow because that land is cursed. Infertile. I used to believe that. The halfway house held unpleasant deeds and even after its destruction/disappearance, it held a power over the land. Where bad people live and do bad things, nothing good can grow. Sounds biblical.

In places in Africa, infertile women are buried in the forest when they die, to avoid contaminating the land and making it sterile, they say.

So our sex on the stone will be another curse to the land.

Later a therapist tells me that my unspoken fears were correct. It was rape. I shouldn't have had that happen to me.

"In most cases of rape, the victim knows the rapist," she starts off slowly, eases into it, looks at me like she wants to give me a hug. "People will say that it's her fault, or that she's confused and that she wanted it. People assume that when two people are in a relationship, all sex is consensual. But they are wrong. A girl can be raped by her boyfriend. It's still rape. And it's still wrong. It seems like you have been holding onto this deep within yourself." She tells me it's okay to talk about it if I want. It's okay if I don't want to. Either way, she respects my decision. I feel somewhat relieved to know that I have told someone who doesn't think I'm repulsive or a slut for having sex in a graveyard. Someone who doesn't blame me.

I think about the story that said you can climb a mountain and whisper your secrets to a tree, cover it with dirt, and the tree will keep your secrets. I think that if I apologize to someone, I will be able to bring life back to that lifeless land. I only remember the grave saying Knoebel. I don't remember dates of birth or death. I don't remember if he was a husband or a father, if he was beloved to someone. I hope that he was because it makes me feel even sorer for what happened over his grave.

But I'm too afraid to go back there. When I visit my hometown, I take the long route, where you have to creep down the two-lane road by the lake. I take the long route because I don't want to have to drive by that plot of land where nothing lives. Where there is a giant oak tree I suspect of dying from the inside because nothing can grow from the dirt. I don't drive by the church, by the pasture, by the lot of failed flowers. I don't drive by the graveyard. I'm afraid if I look back, I'll pale and crumble.

## THE BUILDINGS REBUILT THEMSELVES

“Still, / I would leap too / Into the light, / If I had the chance” – James Wright

The house where Kyle and I first had sex is gone. The house was half built, just concrete blocks. A skeleton of a house, really. And it was half finished on a corner by itself when the neighborhood that housed it went bankrupt. Until we had sex there, I hated that neighborhood. They had leveled a beautiful hilly pasture filled with Brahman cows to create that neighborhood. Two miles, maybe three, of pasture. At the edge of the property, an abandoned tractor rotted behind some fragrant orange trees. But after having sex with Kyle that first time, I fell in love with that eyesore of a half house. It was our place. Like other places we found ourselves, it was in between, it was cast aside, it was transient. I blushed when I ran by it in the afternoons visiting my parents' house. Pausing to look at the hole where the front door should be to admire the spot in what should have been someone's living room. That was where Kyle had laid down a blanket and had taken my pants off. He had kissed my thighs and knees ceremoniously, formally, and then he bit my lips so hard they bled.

Kyle loved the house too. Even after we broke up, it was like a holy neutral ground for us. Because we had pretended to be married there. That first night, when we pretended to hate each other, when we pretended that sex was just practical and good for us physically, our acts symbolized much more. Kyle picked me up and carried me across the threshold like I was a new bride.

That house, despite its lack of a roof, contained our memories. In that house lived the way we fell in love. The secret things we liked about each other like the time he sneezed on the dashboard of my car and got embarrassed when I saw the snot, like the time I wore long khaki shorts after reading *Wild* and got mad at Kyle for saying I looked like a dyke.

The beautiful thing about memories compared to experiences is that, in a memory, we can manipulate the order of events so that everything has a happy ending. If something ends badly, we can remember it in reverse. Like the day my grandmother died. I remember that day backwards because at the beginning of the day, I held her hand and thought I saw her smile, even though that was impossible. At the beginning of the day, she was still breathing, even if it was with the help of the machines. I believed in the medical magic that kept her there long enough for me to say goodbye.

Once, I found a video someone had filmed of the Twin Towers wincing and doubling over on September 11<sup>th</sup>. I don't know what possessed me to do it, but I watched that video in reverse, and it was beautiful. Like a magnet was pulling the twisted pieces of metal out of the bellies of the buildings, like some invisible engineer was shaping sleek planes and sending them in reverse to where they had come from. Sending passengers back to Boston where they were safe. The buildings rebuilt themselves and seemed even taller. People flapped their arms and returned to their offices on the top floors. The fire and smoke celebratory, disappearing and destroying nothing. Nothing bad has happened yet earlier in the morning. But we know that's not what happened.

The half-built house was torn down because a new building company bought up the patchwork of land leftover and began building new houses. The neighborhood is oddly collected together now. The older houses are pastel beachy with port hole windows and neat white trim. The newer houses are more Northern looking, darker colors and earthy tones. Nothing physical of our relationship is left in that neighborhood now.

The night after I see that the house is gone, there's a moth in my room while I'm trying to sleep. I can't really be annoyed, not really. Especially since it was me who left the door open long enough for it to get in. My overhead light is off but the moth still beats against it; I can hear the noise. Why not go for the window? Why not chew a hole and burrow in a sleeve of one of my comfortable sweaters? There must be heat there, or the memory of light that makes it abuse itself. The memory sustains the moth.

We destroy to create. That's always part of it.

The thing I like the most about time is also the thing that scares me: the power of erasure. Manipulation of events till you no longer trust your memories. You can do whatever you want and your memory can be a paradise.

We progress by destroying what sustains us. We destroy everything we touch. A lady being interviewed about her new book on NPR claims that we humans are the next major event of destruction for this planet. We are doing it slowly, hardly measurable in our increments of time. But isn't that how it's always been? We destroy and rebuild. We need something to rebuild. Or build for the first time.

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